

LIFE TRANSITION IN SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: UNIVERSITY  
STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES, ASPIRATIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS IN  
CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates issues of social inequality, structure, and agency in life transition process in a society under dramatic transformation. For many young people in China, entering university and job market are two major life transitions. Meanwhile, China's society is itself in a major transformation process. Profound restructuration is occurring in both the higher education system and labour market, resulting in significant structural disjunction between them. The structural changes have had tremendous impacts on Chinese university students' life transition. Based on a mixed method of using secondary quantitative and first-hand qualitative interview data both collected at two key-point universities, Xi'an Jiaotong University and Lanzhou University, this study explores how and to what extent university students' strategic agency is constrained and enabled in the socioeconomic structures under dramatic transformation.

Theoretically, this study constructs an integrated analytical framework of university students' postgraduate transition in China based on Bourdieu's framework and conception of field, capitals, and habitus, incorporating Schutz's "common sense lifeworld" and Merton's typology of modes of adaptation. Empirically, the literature review and data analysis reveal a common sense lifeworld which presents the cultural goal as higher socioeconomic status and the institutional means as university education, and has profoundly influenced the university students' practices and aspirations before post-university transition. The analysis also reveals a complex relationship between structural constraints and these students' perception of their agency in the anomic situation during their post-university transition, which is caused by the imbalance between the cultural goal and institutional goal. Their responses can be categorized into five types with Merton's typological tool, including conformity, semi-conformity,

retreatism, ritualism, and reformism. Most participants can be identified as conformist or semi-conformist agency. The ability to successfully practice these two types of agency is limited by their possession of capitals, socioeconomic background and past experiences. Failure to practice these two types of agency may result in retreatist or ritualist agency. Although the dominant pattern of interactions between structures and agency shows a reproductive process of social inequality, the existence of reformist agency may inspire a reflexive agency of self-empowerment under the constraint of structures and suggest an empowerment-oriented educational reform in transforming China.

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## DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to all people who have an interest in the life experiences of marginalized youth, their voices and concerns over limited life choice, as well as the social inequality in transforming China.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NCEE (the National College Entrance Examination).....	1
PRC (the People's Republic of China).....	27
SES (socioeconomic status).....	35
CPC (the Communist Party of China) .....	79
CYLC (the Communist Youth League of China).....	85
CET (the College English Test).....	92

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

#### **1.1 Growing Demands for Education Reform in China**

When I was in Canada writing this dissertation in summer, 2011, there were in China more than nine million high school graduates working extremely hard to be enrolled in universities in that nation by preparing for the annual National College Entrance Examinations (NCEE) in June. At this time, an incident broke out which drew considerable attention from the public, media, scholars, as well as government officials - 45 high school students studying at a newly established university boycotted the 2011 NCEE. This university, the South University of Science and Technology of China (SUSTC), pledged to be independent of the official educational system by adopting an autonomous recruitment system and curricula, earning it a reputation as a pioneer in the higher education revolution. The university is still under construction and scheduled to open in 2012, but it recruited its first class of 45 students in March, 2011 (Li, 2011). The students were selected from high schools with aims of cultivating into “innovative talents”, and they did not have to take the NCEE to get into this university as promised by the President of the SUSTC. This project got mixed receptions from the academics from other universities since it was first initiated (Li, 2011), and became even more controversial after the boycott broke out. On May 27, 2011, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Education announced at the press conference that the Ministry of Education had approved the establishment of the SUSTC, but any educational reform must comply with the law and follow the basic national educational rules to guarantee the rights of students. The statement indicated that the 45 high school students currently enrolled in the SUSTC are not exempt from the requirement of the NCEE for getting into universities under China’s current educational system, without which they

will not get degrees that are recognized by the Chinese government (People's Daily Online, 2011). In response, the 45 students and their parents posted a public letter online, vowing that they would not attend the college entrance exams. The president of the SUSTC said that it was up to the students and their parents to decide whether or not to take the NCEE, but he also expressed his concerns over the future of the 45 students if their degrees could not be officially recognized by the central government. Despite the public controversy, none of the 45 students showed up at the NCEE examination rooms at the SUSTC's temporary campus on the first day of the exam. The Ministry of Education indicated later that the NCEE results of the 45 students merely served as a reference for the SUSTC (China Radio International English, 2011).

The incident triggered tremendous discussion and debate among students, parents, and educational professionals regarding higher education in China, presenting strong implications for growing demands for education reform in China. On one hand, this incident reflects the increasing dissatisfaction with the education system in China among the public. Proponents considered the SUSTC as the pioneer of higher education reform and supported them to challenge the authority of the Ministry of Education as well as the state-controlled educational system, and some embraced the SUSTC's project by considering it as an alternative for high school graduates other than the NCEE. On the other hand, growing concern of social inequality also results in critiques to the SUSTC model of higher education. The critics questioned the feasibility and fairness of its independent recruitment system which replaces the NCEE with their own entrance exams (Xiong, 2011), and some had concerns over the credibility of their recruitment process, since the recruitment information was never publicized and accessible to the Chinese high school students in general (Yang, 2011). Although there has been a consensus among the Chinese public and the Government that the higher education system in China needs

reform, the debates and controversies regarding this issue show significant disagreements on how to conduct the desired reform. The debates cover a broad range of heated topics regarding higher education in China, for example, whether or not the NCEE should be maintained, whether or not the government-controlled recruitment system must be abolished, what are the ultimate functions and purposes of higher education, what the relationships between the state and postsecondary institutions should be, how to guarantee fairness not to be jeopardized in embracing autonomous recruitment system established by individual postsecondary institutions, and whether or not an autonomous and diversified recruitment and educational system will eventually lead to elitism and increase the gap between rich and poor students.

The growing public demand for higher education reform is mainly derived from the low employment rate of postsecondary graduates in China. The period in which I conducted my research for this thesis, interviewing university students who were planning to graduate in 2009 in China, was one of global economic recession. The recession officially started at the end of 2007 in the United States, and the situation became worse in 2008 and 2009. The impact of this recession on higher education has been significant, and its effects are continuing. Globally, the employment rate of new graduates has been markedly affected during the recession. In China, growing graduate unemployment has been a major problem as well. Among the interviewees who participated in my research, almost half of them mentioned that they have experienced greater pressures to find employment, because many enterprises closed down and many others were reducing employees or suspended recruitment in the economic recession. However, some of them also pointed out that the situation for postgraduate employment has not been optimistic for years, and the economic recession just intensified the pressure.

Although there have not been authoritative statistics on the employment rate of university graduates in China, several related issues, including the declining employment rate, the decreasing average wage for their first employment and the increasing difficulty in finding jobs or satisfactory jobs have been recognized as problems in recent years (Hui, 2010; Xinhuanet, 2009). Based on the numbers shown in Table 1.1, the employment rate of postsecondary graduates has been around 70% almost for a decade, ranging from 68% to 77% between 2002 and 2010, and it declined from 80% in 2001 to 68% in 2009, rising slightly in 2010, and meanwhile, the number of postsecondary graduates has been growing dramatically. Most statistical numbers were provided through mass media, and researchers questioned the accuracy of these numbers since they were either obtained through the self-report from individual postsecondary institutions which may tend to report higher employment rate than it actually was, or by using ambiguous criteria to define employment (Hu, 2005; Hui, 2010; Wang & Lan, 2010). As for why recent university graduates have constantly experienced intensive postgraduate employment pressure in recent years, there has been extensive discussion and debate (Bai, 2006; Ding, 2005; The China Post, 2011; Wang, 2009; Wang & Moffatt, 2008), but the imbalance in demand and supply of university graduates in labour markets caused by the expansion of higher education enrollment has been widely recognized as one of the most important reasons. Since the late 1990s, the drive to make higher education more widely available has led to a dramatic growth in graduate numbers. Table 1.1 shows that the number of postsecondary graduates has increased approximately 6 times, from 1.15 million in 2001 to 6.6 million in 2011. This dramatic and constant increase of postsecondary graduates for a decade results in tremendous pressure on the capacity of labour markets to absorb such high numbers of newly qualified entrants.

**Table 1.1 Number of Postsecondary Graduates and Unemployment Number and Rates, 2001-2011**

	Number of Postsecondary Graduates (Million) <sup>1</sup>	Employment Rate (in August)(%) <sup>2</sup>
2001	1.15	80%
2002	1.45	77%
2003	2.12	75%
2004	2.80	73%
2005	3.40	72.6%
2006	4.13	72%
2007	4.95	70%
2008	5.59	68%
2009	6.11	68%
2010	6.55	72.2%
2011	6.60	N/A

1. The numbers of postsecondary graduates were collected from the “Educational statistics yearbook of China” from 2001 to 2011, retrieved from the National Bureau of Statistics of China website.

2. The statistics from 2001 to 2005 were retrieved from Education Online [http://www.eol.cn/jiuye\\_dy\\_4516/20060621/t20060621\\_184927.shtml](http://www.eol.cn/jiuye_dy_4516/20060621/t20060621_184927.shtml); the 2006 employment rate was retrieved from Beijing Modern Business <http://money.163.com/06/0717/11/2M7SBS0S00251LE8.html>;

The rate in 2007 was retrieved from STNN

[http://www.stnn.cc/society\\_focus/200802/t20080221\\_735385.html](http://www.stnn.cc/society_focus/200802/t20080221_735385.html);

The rate in 2008 was retrieved from China Economic Herald

[http://www.ceh.com.cn:8080/epaper/ceh/20090613/A07/A07\\_64.htm](http://www.ceh.com.cn:8080/epaper/ceh/20090613/A07/A07_64.htm);

The rate in 2009 was retrieved from Xinhuanet

[http://news.xinhuanet.com/employment/2009-09/01/content\\_12687831.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/employment/2009-09/01/content_12687831.htm);

The rate in 2011 was retrieved from Ministry of Education report

[http://news.china.com/zh\\_cn/domestic/945/20100721/16037681.html](http://news.china.com/zh_cn/domestic/945/20100721/16037681.html).

All these statistics were retrieved in July, 2011

## 1.2 Life Course Transitions of Chinese Students

For many young people in China, entering university after completing high school and finding a starting-point for careers after graduating from university are two major transitions in their life course. China’s society is undergoing a major transformation process. Profound restructuration is occurring in both the higher education system and labour market, as well as in the interactions between the two. These structural changes have generated tremendous impacts on the two critical transitions for Chinese young people, and also have become important policy concerns.

These phenomena have attracted considerable research interest. While most studies focus on either the high school-university transition or the university-work transition, however, it is rare to find integrative research which views both transitions as part of a longitudinal and continuous experience of university students in China. This study focuses on university students' postgraduate aspirations and achievements in transforming China, but it also discusses how experiences in postsecondary transitions (from high school to university) influence their university experiences, postgraduate aspirations and achievements. This study also addresses how higher education and labour market systems interact when they are both undergoing structural transformations, and how these dramatic changes in structures and interactions constrain and enable students' agency in achieving their life goals. All these issues are important to students, parents, educational professionals, and policy makers.

### **1.3 An Introduction to Empirical and Theoretical Approaches**

In addition to practical and policy implications of this study, an important contribution of my dissertation will be to fill a gap in the literature on youth transition studies at both empirical and theoretical levels. Empirically, there has been dearth of literature on how education is related to labor market outcomes in socioeconomic transformation processes. My study focuses on this issue in China during a period in which the country is undergoing a transformation from a highly coordinated socialist system to one marked by more uncertainty, with prevalent and dramatic restructuration in its economic system and some underlying and unobtrusive changes in social and political systems.

Theoretically, literature on youth life transitions is typically dominated by either a micro-individual approach, such as rational choice theory, which assumes a direct relationship between education and labour market outcomes as a cost-benefit calculation process (Boudon, 1974;



Goldthorpe, 1996), or a macro-structural approach, such as social attainment theory, which overemphasizes the determination of social and institutional structures by exploring persistent influences of structural variables like socio-economic background, gender, or ethnicity in one's life course transitions (Andres, Anisef, Krahn, Looker, & Thiessen, 1999; Blau & Duncan, 1967; Davis, 1999; Geller, 1996; Jonsson, Mills, & Muller, 1996; Looker, 1993). In recent studies, such as those conducted by Lehmann (2004, 2005, 2008), Bourdieu's two notions of habitus and cultural capital are used to explore the relationships between structure and agency in school-to-work transition among secondary graduates in Canada and Germany. Rather than emphasize selected aspects of Bourdieu's theory, my dissertation attempts to construct an integrated explanatory model of university students' educational attainments and postsecondary achievements in China, based on the general framework and major concepts of his theory of practice.

In constructing my theoretical framework, after recognizing the limitations of social stratification and social attainment approaches, I put my focus on critiquing rational choice theories by questioning some of their fundamental assumptions. They assume for example, that actors take actions predominantly based on logical intentions and rational thinking, and have the ability to obtain and process all the relevant messages when acting. Schutz's "common sense life world" is introduced to argue against rational choice theorists' tendency to ignore the impacts on actors' actions from their previous experiences and taken-for-granted knowledge. According to Schutz (1967, p. 7), "this world existed before our birth, experienced and interpreted by others, our predecessors, it is an organized world", and forms the normative structures for all social actions and provides some guiding elements to one's segment of experiences. Schutz's "common sense life world" emphasizes how external and general social contexts, which predate the

existence of the actor, affect actors' actions and decision making processes through socially constructed and distributed knowledge, while Bourdieu's concept of habitus as an intermediation focuses on how the external structures are internalized by individual actors and how the dispositions and practices employed in responding to the structures are generated (Bourdieu, 1990b). Schutz and Bourdieu are similar in pointing out the structural restrictions on rationality in human agency in real life and considering problematic circumstances that serve as the precondition for developing and practicing strategic agency. However, compared to Schutz, Bourdieu was actually more interested in exploring the possibilities of rational choice and action circumscribed in confined social and institutional contexts as well as actors' ability to utilize strategically certain objective structures, rules, and capitals for competing for power in the field.

Given my focus on students' life transition processes in social structures undergoing dramatic transformation, the precondition of developing certain levels of strategic agency is not absent. Schutz's "common sense reality" provides an understanding of socially and historically sedimented consciousness and experiences regarding education and employment in China. Bourdieu's theory of practice with concepts of habitus, field and forms of capitals can provide a fundamental framework to explain the processes and patterns of Chinese students' educational experiences and postgraduate achievements. An effective way to understand strategic choices and actions within the scheme of habitus and common sense life world in transforming social and institutional contexts is to deliberate the pathways from means to goals. Thus, as a thinking tool, Merton's typology of modes of adaptation is incorporated into the theoretical framework to provide an approach to classify strategic agency, which deals with structural and tensions based on the individual acceptance or rejection of socially-accepted goals and institutionalized means (Merton, 1957).

An exploration of the dynamic interactions between structures and agency requires the researcher to use an ontological perspective that can transcend the boundary between radical subjectivism and definitive objectivism, so a constructive realist approach is adopted to recognize the constructed reality existing in people's mind, but also not to deny the existence of objective reality in which constructed agency is situated. Also, the relationships between constructed agency and objective structures and institutions can be examined in their dynamic interactions.

Epistemologically, a constructive realist approach requires both qualitative data to explore individual narratives as constructed reality and quantitative data to present aggregate phenomenon as objective reality. Thus, methodologically, my study applies a mixed method approach. I employ secondary quantitative data which was collected through a project called "Employment Related Issues among University Students in China", to provide aggregate analysis of social structures especially how socioeconomic backgrounds affects university students' experiences, decision-making, and postgraduate achievements. The details of this project will be introduced in the methodology chapter. The thesis also employs qualitative data gained through interviews with 40 students in their 4<sup>th</sup> year of university, in order to offer a rich source for descriptive and interpretive analysis of individual strategic agency in making decision and taking action in their important life transition processes. In addition, a brief survey after each interview provides background information on interview participants and helps identify comparisons between my interview sample and the secondary data.

#### **1.4 Structural Overview**

Combining quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis, my thesis addresses several important research questions: What are the institutional, social and cultural contexts that shape

education and labour markets for university graduates in China? Who are the university students in China, and how, if at all, do their socio-economic background, gender, and residential characteristics affect their possession of capitals? How do new university graduates, especially students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, perceive and negotiate with the changes and challenges which were primarily caused by the austere structural and institutional changes in higher education system and job market in China as well as the economic recession since 2008? Sharing the same levels of education and similar socioeconomic background, why do they choose and achieve differently in postgraduate transition processes? How do my findings relate to individual students' life transition decision-making processes at both a micro-level and macro-level educational and labour market policies in China?

The theoretical and methodological issues are explored in chapters three and four, respectively. Chapter 2 provides a background review of the historical and social contexts of China with respects to the structural connections and disconnections between education and employment as well as the related inequality issues, while Chapters 5 to 7 present and analyze data to help address the research questions. Chapter 5 analyzes the secondary data from a general survey and discusses how socioeconomic backgrounds affect Chinese students' university experiences and postgraduate transition. The operational definition of social and cultural capital is discussed in this chapter. In Chapter 6, I will discuss how university students perceive structural and institutional changes and challenges from high school-university transition to school-work transition, and to what extent they perceive the current institutional arrangements as enabling or restricting their transitions. Chapter 7 focuses on how students would negotiate with these structural barriers and challenges and practice their own agency in the process of post-graduate transition. By using Bourdieu's conception of capitals and habitus, I attempt to identify

different types of agency, and discuss how family backgrounds, parental influences and gender roles directly and indirectly affect students' practices of strategic agency to respond and negotiate the structural changes and challenges.

## **Chapter II**

### **Setting the Background: Education, Employment, and Inequality in China**

The relationship between education and occupational structure has been a focus of long-standing interest to sociologists given that the nature of educational opportunities, job selection and rates of social mobility have been used as measures of social equality and social justice. Furthermore, there is no doubt that the admission system employed by educational institutions plays a critical role in young peoples' educational opportunity and their positions in educational field, and the recruitment criteria and procedures adopted in job market also largely determine young people's employment opportunity and socioeconomic status. In China, a connection between examination-based education and occupation has long existed. Education or taking examinations has been considered as a vital mechanism for people moving up in the social hierarchy since ancient times of China, and the interference of the government in the connections between educational system and employment can be observed frequently.

#### **2.1 Meritocracy and Social Mobility in Ancient China**

China has a long history of valuing education highly<sup>1</sup>. During 600-250 BC, the Chinese intellectuals emphasized that merit and ability through study should take precedence over ascribed status in state appointments (Lee, 2000; Yu and Suen, 2005). However, meritocracy during that period of time was still in intellectuals' ideal, because education remained the privilege of landed aristocrats and prosperous merchants. The imperial state increased its expenditures on education during the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties, and the access to education started expanding to civilians. At the core of traditional education in China

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<sup>1</sup> All the information in this paragraph was retrieved from Yu and Suen's article "Historical and contemporary exam-driven education fever in China (Yu & Suen, 2005); and Lee's book "Education in Traditional China: A History"(T. H. C. Lee, 2000).

was the imperial examination or civil service examination firstly established in Sui Dynasty (605) and had continuously implemented and changed moderately over centuries until 1905. After thousand years of implementation and development, the imperial examination became the primary way for imperial state recruiting government officials and supposedly for men climbing the social hierarchy regardless of one's family background. The examinations required extensive knowledge of the Confucian classics which formed the standard curriculum as well as the official knowledge and ideology of the state, and the curriculum and examinations gradually became empire-wide and reached into counties and villages. There were two levels of scrutiny in the Tang examination system. The local level of examination was open to any scholar who wished to take it, and the candidates who passed the local competition were dispatched to the capital, where they took the examination administered by the Department of State Affairs. The successful candidates were eligible for appointment in the court (Lee, 2000, p.132-133). The imperial examination system reached its maturity in Song Dynasty. Institutionally, the Song government made the examination system the sole and most important mechanism for managing social mobility. The three-tier examination system was officially established during this time and remained intact for the remainder of the history of the imperial examinations in China, which included the prefectural, the provincial and the palace examination (Lee, 2000, p.139-140). The candidates registered in the prefectural government could take the lowest level test, and those who passed it were then dispatched to take the second level examination in the Capital the next spring. The second level test was administered by the Department of Rites (*Li Bu*) which then recommended those who passed to the emperor. The emperor then conducted the final examination in person in the palace. Technically, no candidates would be failed in the palace examination, as the emperor merely decided on the candidates' ranking, thus, the candidates who

made it to the final stage were available for official appointment. The competition in the examinations was extremely intense due to low recruitment rate.

Confucian education and the imperial examination restructured the complex relations between social status, political power, and cultural prestige. Education was premised on social distinctions between literati, peasants, artisans, and merchants in descending order of social status rank, for example, the sons of merchants were not legally permitted to take the imperial examination until Ming dynasty (1368-1644) (Lee, 2000). In addition to some occupational prohibitions which kept many out of the exam competition, most of the time, there was gender bias against all women. The predominant history of the imperial examination showed that women were prohibited from participating in the examination even though some of them were educated. Furthermore, family background was extremely critical in seeking to attain or maintain elite status, because the dynastic education system was limited to candidates already literate in classical Chinese, initial stages of training and preparing a son for the imperial examination became the responsibility of families, not to mention the potential preference of social networks and money in the recruitment processes despite of restrictive regulations.

Furthermore, this Confucian educational system, which was based on nontechnical, moral and political theories, aimed to cultivate elites' moral characters and talents in governing the nation, and more importantly, their loyalty to the emperor and nation. The ideology and knowledge obtained through such education could explicitly provide and constantly reinforce the legitimacy of the paramount power of the emperor, the bureaucratic institutions of imperial state, and the feudalist social hierarchies. Thus, it appeared that education and examination in ancient China embraced meritocracy and provided a vehicle for ordinary civilians obtain higher social status, but the social mobility was still highly restricted by the social hierarchy which was



justified by imperial explanation and application of Confucianism, in order to maintain existing institutional conditions and social hierarchies.

Although the imperial examination allowed a small group of people who were from lower social ranks to obtain higher status, for the large majority of lower status civilians, achieving higher status through education was rather an internalized value or ideology than reality. The stories about personal suffering of individuals who underwent the exams, both in the preparation and in the taking of these exams, have become part of Chinese intellectual history. Some candidates were known to be repeatedly failed in the exams. Some committed suicide because of the disgrace that these failures brought to themselves and their families. Others continued taking exams even as very old, grey-haired men. However, for those who rose up through the ranks by passing these exams and being selected for administrative positions, it meant that their clans or families also rose in social prestige and wealth. This ideology has pervasively perpetuated in Chinese people's mind and practices in everyday life for thousand years. Some old proverbs frequently mentioned in modern China have demonstrated the profound and prevalent influence of this ideology in varied aspects of Chinese people's everyday life, for example, one proverb links education to social status, "only the learned rank high; all other businesses are low"; another one attaches wealth and morality to education, "the poor become rich because of study, the rich become noble because of study"; and some even relate education with marriage life, i.e. "golden house is embedded in the books, and pretty women are hidden in the books."

In general, by introducing traditional education system in China, I underscore the vital role of examination-based education for Chinese people in ancient time. A predominant value in traditional Chinese society was that getting education and taking imperial exams was the

exclusive pathway for people, especially those who were born with low socioeconomic status, to achieve socioeconomic success, in other words, alternative pathways leading to success were generally denied in both social structures and people's consciousness. In addition, holding the power of providing and organizing imperial examination, the imperial court gained dominant control over education and social mobility.

## **2.2 Egalitarianism in Education System and Job Assignment Policy in Socialist China**

After the imperial examination was abolished in 1905 and before the Soviet Union's education model was adopted during Mao's era of socialist China, several educational institutions including universities had established systems based on European models since the late nineteenth century. These models initially promoted the learning of western science and technology and western values on democracy and liberty were later upheld in order to preserve the autonomy of the university within a civil society free from governmental interference. However, the newly established educational system was vulnerable and fragile in a country which was undergoing impoverishment and war for decades.

After 1949, when the People's Republic of China was founded, the new government resumed jurisdiction over education in China, and took over all universities and colleges, including public and private institutions as well as those subsidized by foreigners. The higher education system in China was restructured in accordance with Russian models, which allowed central government have full control of education system in terms of planning and financing education and post-education employment. During Mao's era, higher education institutions received their funding almost exclusively from government appropriation according to the state budgetary plan. In 1952, the national college entrance exam (NCEE) was first established to select highly qualified candidates for the colleges and cultivate reserve cadres for the nation. The

central government strictly enforced admission quotas and stipulated uniform regulations for each step of the admission procedure. Provincial governments were only the executive agencies, and the colleges and candidates had little right to decide the recruitment policy. Thus, the early mission of the NCEE was not remarkably different from the imperial examination in traditional education system.

Nevertheless, Mao's socialist educational ideal was to promote social equality through a substantial expansion of the access to education especially for peasants and working-class. This strategy aimed to enable everyone developing morally, intellectually, and physically and being cultivated with socialist ideology, thus, education must serve proletarian politics and be combined with productive labour (Tsang, 2000). To meet this ideal, even before the cultural revolution in 1996, a university applicant's class origin<sup>2</sup> and political commitment to communist revolution had a strong influence over admissions, and political education and manual activities were incorporated into higher education's curriculum, and to remove the setback of socialist ideology and institution, Mao took further steps to abolish the NCEE during the cultural revolution from 1966 to 1976, and suspended university recruitment in 1966 for reconstruction and restored it in 1970 by mainly enrolling workers, peasants and soldiers as students (Tsang, 2000).

In regard to the employment opportunities for university graduates, from 1951 to 1966, the higher education sector was part of the planned economy, and government was entirely responsible for graduate job assignment. Since the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976 made stagnant the higher education system, the graduate assignment system was suspended. After the

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<sup>2</sup> The proletariat class origin including worker and peasant background was much more appreciated than other class origins in university admission and government cadre recruitment process.

end of the Cultural Revolution, China restored its higher education system and graduate assignment system in 1981. University graduates as precious talents were highly demanded by economic development at initial stage, and government was responsible for arranging these talents, so no one had to be worried about unemployment. The college graduate thereby enjoyed the superior social status of pre-officials and a guaranteed tenure.

Despite the striking differences between the socialist state and imperial state of China in terms of ideology, the central government has always played explicit and critical role in education system, and that has become an indispensable tool to spread the dominant ideology and legitimate the authority of the dominant class. Through designating education as the primary and exclusive pathway leading to higher social status signified by power, resource, and prestige, and embedding ideology into curriculum and examination questions, so that people who are motivated to pursue successful life and higher social status through education would develop a propensity to accept the dominant ideology consciously and unconsciously.

## **2.3 Higher Education and Educational Inequalities in Reform Era China**

### ***2.3.1 China is in Social Transformation***

It is difficult to define what kind of social transformation China has been undergoing for more than three decades since its central government initiated the economic reform policy in 1978. One type of social change that parallels China's situation is post-socialist transition, which mainly refers to the Central and East European countries after the Soviet Union was dissolved. Despite of all the variations among the postsocialist societies, they are widely assumed as sharing some general trends, that is the system change from a one-party socialist system to Parliamentary (western style) democracy at the political level, and from plan economy to market

economy (Pickel, 2002). However, in contrast with other post-socialist nations, while economic reform for over three-decade has advanced transition to a market economy, China has not experienced drastic changes in its political system in the direction of a western style democracy. The relationships among state, market and society are conducive to developing the market economy and, at the same time, maintaining a stable political and social order during the transition.

In China, the economic reform has brought spectacular economic growth, as well as dramatic change in social stratification and social structure, including increasing gaps between rural and urban, regions and between poor and rich in cities. The economic reform in China have been highly influenced by the process of globalization which introduces a large-scale privatization of property and liberalization of market. Attempting to integrate into the world economic system, China has been serving as cheaper labor provider and established labour-intensive manufacturing and exporting industries since the early 1980s. However, in the coming decade, China is pushing forward a transition from labour-intensive to capital-technology intensive growth during economic development. If this industrial transition becomes successful, it will have profound influence over the structure of labour market in China.

Despite all the political controls and governance, the interactions between state, market, and society have been generating constant and intense tensions and conflicts, which become the driving force in pushing explicit and implicit changes in political system, but it is not possible to predict the outcome of such interacting processes and changes. With ongoing economic transition to liberal capitalism and constrained changes in the political system caused by changes in its economic and social structure, China is walking into a future of full of uncertainty. Due to the uncertainty of the social development during China's current reform era, I prefer "social

transformation” to “social transition” in describing the current situation of China, since the term of “transition” always has an implication of a definite idea of the outcome of a process of change, while “transformation” alludes to the understanding processes of change moving toward something new and unknown (Verdery, 1996). This thesis identifies contemporary China’s society as in reform era, and since the economic reform was officially initiated in 1978, the social transformation taking place in China now can also be referred as post-1978 transformation. The discussion of relationships between state, labour market, and higher education in this study will provide a vivid background setting of individual young people struggling for their well beings in facing life transitions.

### ***2.3.2 Major Changes in Higher Education System in Post-1978 China***

Starting from 1980s, China’s higher education system has undergone three interrelated changes: expanding the enrollment and the quantity of postsecondary institutions, reducing the share of educational expenditure to the total expenditure in spite of the increasing absolute amount, thereby diversifying the overall educational financing system (Tsang & Ding, 2005). Nevertheless, the governments never weaken or even reinforce their substantial financial support to some educational institutions which are classified as the “key point”.

During 1978-1988, the scale of higher education was expanding with a significant increase in both student enrollment and number of institutions (Luo, Zhou, Bi, & Xiao, March 19, 1989), but the expansion slowed down during 1989 to 1998 due to a major concern that the national economy might not be able to absorb the increasing university graduates if the economy slowed down (Bai, 2006; Tsang, 2000). Starting from 1999, high school graduates began to enroll in higher education at an accelerated pace. The enrolment number jumped from 1.08 million in 1998 to 4.47 million in 2004, and the enrolment rate increased from 9.8 percent to 19 percent

(Bai, 2006). According to a statement of government, before this new decision to expand postsecondary enrollment was released, the government had predicted a 7 percent increase for GDP, and decided that an increase of about 9 percent in higher education enrolment would be an adequate target<sup>3</sup>.

Not only higher education, but also economic growth afforded more resources for educational development and school expansion in general. The government budgetary expenditure on education has been increasing dramatically since 1978 (Wu, 2010). The enrollment rate of school-age children has increased from 85.5% in 1978 to 92.2% in 2005, and transition rate to junior high school rose up from 87.7% in 1978 to 98.4% in 2005. These ratios show that the 9-year period of compulsory education has been universalized across the country. The transitional rate to senior high school upon the completion of junior high school increased from 30% in the 1980s to 68% in 2005. Higher education has also been opening up since 1998, therefore the transition rate to postsecondary education, given the completion of senior high school, increased dramatically from 46% in 1998 to 64% in 1999, and to 82% in 2004, and the expansion has been slightly slowed down in 2005, as the central government requested, so the transition rate to postsecondary schools in 2005 dropped to 76% (Wu, 2010). However, the number of postsecondary graduates has increased approximately 6 times, from 1.15 million in 2001 to 6.6 millions in 2011. This dramatic and constant increase of postsecondary graduates for a decade results in tremendous pressure on the capacity of labour market.

Although there is no doubt that the central government intended to promote educational opportunities for all its citizens including those with disadvantaged backgrounds, the expansion of education and the distribution of educational opportunities are two separate processes (Mare,

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<sup>3</sup> State Department, "Resolution on the further development of educational reform and quality education working meeting on 13 June 1999," opening paragraph.

1980): the former may not necessarily lead to more equal access to education among different social classes. Along with the expansion of higher education since 1999, there has been an excessively rapid increase in tuition fees for higher education. From 1949 to 1988, China had entirely free higher education. In addition to no tuition, students were given a living stipend, and dormitory accommodation was free. Therefore, higher education was considered entirely a public benefit to be funded by public revenue. In 1988, the government started to charge tuition and dormitory fees for students whose scores in the NCEE were slightly below the cut-off line of universities or colleges, while regular students who got higher scores still benefited from free higher education. About a decade later, in 1997, the rates of tuition and fee increase were around 25%. The average tuition rose from around 3000 *yuan/year* in 1999 to more than 4000 *yuan/year* in 2000. Table 2.1 shows the general trend of increase in tuition and fees charged by postsecondary institutions in China. Moreover, tuition is charged differently in different institutions based on the quality of education they provide. Also, since the students and their parents began to relate their specialty orientations to labour market demands, tuition also becomes “occupation sensitive”. Within the same institution, the “popular” majors, such as computer science, engineering, foreign languages and business, charge more than less popular ones, such as math, agriculture, social sciences, and humanities. Thus, only the students whose parents are able to afford the increasing tuition and living fees can be beneficiaries of the expansion of higher education. Under the rapid growth of a market-oriented economy, affordability becomes a precondition for students to gain access to higher education, in addition to the grade in the NCEE which used to be the single consideration taken into account. In other words, income inequality is now directly associated with issues of educational inequality. The inability to afford higher education becomes a tremendous barrier for students from low income



families to receive university education, which largely affect the young people living in relatively poor rural areas as well as those from working poor families in urban areas.

The heavy financial burden on poor students, especially on those who were admitted in key universities, has been slightly alleviated recently due to a financial aid system established by the central government. The financial aid to students includes: (1) Grants. The state grant program was established in 2002 to award excellent needy undergraduate students in higher education institutions; (2) Scholarships. Merit-based scholarships are one of the main types of aid available to college students since 1986 and expanded since 2005; (3) Work-study program. In 1994, a policy on “Regulations on building work-study funds in regular higher education institutions” was issued to require all institutions to construct work-study funds aiming at helping poor students; (4) Tuition waivers. Only a very limited number of needy students may get this kind of aid; (5) Student loans. The first loan program began in 1986, but it was only widely implemented after 2000. There are three types of student loan programs in China: the General-Commercial Student Loans Scheme, the Government-Subsidized Student Loans Scheme, and the Government-subsidized Student Resident Loan (Shen, 2008). However, except for the student loan, other types of financial aid are not allocated equally but based on the rank of the higher educational institutions. The students in prestigious and key point universities have much better chance to receive financial aid from the governments (Tsang & Ding, 2005).

**Table 2.1 Annual Income Level of Rural and Urban Households and University Tuition Fees in China, 1995 – 2009**

	<b>A: Per Capita Annual Income of Rural Households (RMB yuan)</b>	<b>B: Per Capita Annual Income of Urban Household (RMB yuan)</b>	<b>C: Annual Tuition and Fees in Average</b>
<b>1995</b>	1577	4288	<2000
<b>1996</b>	1920	4844	<2000
<b>1997</b>	2090	5188	2500-3000
<b>1998</b>	2161	5458	2500-3000
<b>1999</b>	2210	5888	2500-3000

<b>2000</b>	2253	6316	4000
<b>2001</b>	2366	6907	4000
<b>2002</b>	2475	8177	4500
<b>2003</b>	2622	9061	4500
<b>2004</b>	2936	10128	4500
<b>2005</b>	3254	11320	4000-5000
<b>2006</b>	3587	12719	4000-5000
<b>2007</b>	4140	14908	4000-5000
<b>2008</b>	4760	17067	4000-5000
<b>2009</b>	5153	18858	>5000

Data Sources: A and B: Comprehensive statistical data, National Bureau of Statistics of China, available at <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/>. C: No accurate statistical data can be found regarding nationwide average annual tuition and fees, so these rough numbers were collected from various news reports discussing the dramatic increase of tuition fees of postsecondary institutions as well as some provincial statistics (Hong, 2004). The tuition and fees vary in terms of discipline and type of postsecondary insitutions. Generally speaking, social sciences and humanities charge less tuition than natural sciences and engineering, and universities charge more than colleges.

At each level of education from primary school to university, the officially recognized key point schools would receive substantial supports including funding and other resources from the level of government which ratifies this “key point” title to them. For universities, the central government launched two major projects, “211 Project” and “985 Project”. These projects were initiated the end of 1990s to develop high-level research and “world class” universities. The aim of the 211 project (whose name refers to 100 universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century) is to build up 100 top-level higher education institutions and key disciplines in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 985 project, the title refers to the month and year in which it was announced, is aimed at developing 10 to 12 so-called world-class institutions, plus a number of renowned high-level research institutions. Investments from the government in these key point universities are much higher than in other higher education institutions.

### ***2.3.3 Rural-urban Disparities in Education***

Among all kinds of social inequality in China, the rural-urban division has become the most striking and restrictive institutional barrier in blocking social mobility. Notwithstanding the

emphasis on egalitarianism, the status hierarchy in socialist China before 1978 has never been completely eliminated. In 1958, a rigid household registration institution, or *Hukou*, was promulgated to control the movement of people between urban and rural area, and the vast majority of Chinese were restricted to their place of birth for their lifetime. Based on this *Hukou* system, peasant status was entitled the assignment of certain amounts of land bound to farming, but peasants were cut off from quite a few urban privileges for decades<sup>4</sup>, such as nine years of compulsory education, public health care, and public housing, and they largely lived in poverty (Parish & Whyte, 1978; Unger, 1984). Only a tiny fraction of the rural-born had the chance to move up to urban areas through higher education, marriage, military recruitment, and job assignments (Kirkby, 1985). Since the early 1980s when a market-oriented economy started to develop, peasants have been allowed to leave their land to work at nonagricultural jobs locally or elsewhere for higher income (Unger, 1994), so migrant peasant labour flooded towns and cities, but their rural residential status indicates that they are still at the lowest level of the social hierarchy. Among all the vehicles they can take to change their rural residential status into urban one, higher education is the most widely adopted pathway especially for young people. However, the rural-urban division again makes this vehicle hard to access. A comparison of enrollment rates between students in rural areas and urban areas reveals substantial disparities in access to higher education. For example, in 1992, 156,981 children were admitted to primary schools in the rural areas of China, while 12 years later (6 years of primary schooling and 6 years of secondary schooling), only 8.2% of them successfully finished high school; during the same

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<sup>4</sup> It has been difficult to promote nine year of compulsory education in rural areas, because the nationwide nine-year compulsory education only exempted students in elementary and junior high schools from paying tuition and fee for textbooks, they still needed to pay extra fees such as facility expenditures, so the dropout rate in rural schools especially junior high schools has been high due to inability to afford extra fees. The nine-year compulsory education has been reinforced in 2010, and the extra fees are eliminated. A comprehensive public healthcare for rural residents has only been officially implemented and promoted in 2010.

period, urban areas had a 61% high school completion rate for the corresponding cohort. Of these students in rural areas who completed high school, only 76% of them took the College Entrance Exam in 2004, and of that small group, 83% of them were admitted (Yang, 2010).

Economic barriers pose substantial difficulties for rural students to have access to higher education. Many young people from rural areas find it difficult to afford the increasing cost of higher education. According to China Statistics figures, the Gini index in China has increased from 0.290 around the end of 1970s to 0.450 in 2005 (Wu, 2010). One of the most prominent phenomena of income inequality is found between rural and urban populations (Hong, 2004). According to Table 2.1, the income of residents in China's rural areas is still relatively low, and the tuition fee increase has put considerable pressure on rural residents. Over the period of rapid higher education expansion from 1998 to 2006, the income divide between the urban-rich and the rural-poor has widened so sharply that it has made it easier for the well-off to pay for college and harder for those at the bottom of the income distribution. Table 2.1 shows that from 1995 to 2009, the per capita income of rural residents increased from approximately 1577 *yuan* to 5153 *yuan*, while the per capita income of urban residents increased from approximately 4288 *yuan* to more than 18800 *yuan*; in other words, the urban-rural ratio of income per capita has dramatically increased from 2.72 in 1995 to 3.63 in 2009. In addition, the annual tuition fees between 1997 and 2009 have consistently been higher than the per capita income of rural household.

Educational inequality is not only embodied in unequal opportunity to access to certain types of education, but also in the unequal quality of education provided by different schools. A growing body of research has revealed that schools in rural areas which serve high concentrations of poor, low-achieving students receive fewer resources than schools in the urban

areas in general (Hong, 2004; Xu Yang, 2010; Zhao, 2010). The unequal quality of education can be observed not only in school, but also outside school (Xu Yang, 2010). Young people living in rural areas mostly grow up in impoverished neighborhoods and attend primary and secondary schools which are far less well equipped than schools attended by their more privileged urban peers. According to Reimers (2000, p. 77), “in addition to the unequal learning chances that stem from initial inequality, many of the constraints to equal educational opportunity are in the schools themselves.” The differences in the financial resources between rural and urban schools lead to differences in the resources available to schools and classrooms and to differences in the quality of teachers (Reimers, 2000). Furthermore, urban students’ parents are more likely to be educated and in better position to offer more out-of-school resources, more stimuli from family and neighborhood environment, more supporting attitudes and better access to books.

#### ***2.3.4 Gender Inequality in Education and Employment***

Gender inequality as a research topic has proliferated in China since the early 1980s, but when evaluating the impact of economic reform on gender inequality, the results remain mixed and inconclusive (Entwistle & Henderson, 2000). This study will only focus on gender inequality with respect to education and job opportunity.

There has been a widely recognized advancement of women’s status in China since the founding of the PRC in 1949. During 1950s-1970s, gender equality has been promoted through passing legislation to ensure women’s education and job opportunity, mobilizing the Women’s Emancipation Movement to expand women’s involvement in political, educational and economic sectors, as well as all collective social practices through generations (H. Dong, 1995; Perry, 1998;

Shu, 2004; Zou, 2003). Regarding the situation during reform era, a national survey in 2000 indicates that among women between 18 and 64 years of age, the proportion who completed secondary education has increased significantly compared to ten years ago (Women of China English Monthly, December 2001). In 1978, women accounted for 32.9% of the total labour force (Ministry of Labor, 1999), and then women's share of the labour force increased from 44% in 1982 to 46% in 1995 (Parish & Busse, 2000). In addition, the survey shows that Chinese women have gained a sense of self-respect, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-empowerment, and their equal role with men in household has been widely respected by men (Women of China English Monthly, December 2001). Besides the legislation and mobilized women's movement before 1978, the one-child policy launched in early 1980s was another impetus to equalize gender status in Chinese families, especially for young generations, since parents would like to devote all family resources to their only child regardless of the child's sex (Zhou, 2006).

However, others observe that as the market developed, the power of the state in advocating women's right has been eroded, leading to labour market discrimination against female workers in hiring and layoffs, job placement, and wage determination, especially in private sectors, thus lowering the economic status of women relative to men (Honig & Hershatter, 1988). Although a market economy has opened up more opportunities to Chinese women for their professional development, at same time, income and promotion gaps have widened (Gao, 2001; Tefft, 1996; Women of China English Monthly, December 2001). As far as occupation is concerned, women are less likely to be found in administrative and high paying professional jobs, but more likely to be found in clerical and sales occupations. Meanwhile, compared with men, women have a much lower rate of promotion. With respect to wages, women earn 80% as much as men (Y. Bian, Logan, & Shu, 2000; W. Tang & Parish, 2000). Despite their disadvantaged

status in the labour market, many Chinese women attempt to resist gender roles and gender inequality through enhancing educational attainment and choosing male-dominant subjects, such as Engineering (N. Lin & Bian, 1991).

Access to education has long been a focus of gender equality studies. According to the report from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC, 2005), although there is still a disparity between men and women regarding years of education and dropout rate, the gap has been narrowing. Since 1980s, researchers have constantly observed fewer gender differences in enrollment or in other dimensions of basic education in urban China (Falbo & Polit, 1986; F. S. Liu, 2006; Tsui & Rich, 2002), and most of these studies consider the decline of gender inequality as the unintended consequence of implementation of the one-child policy in China and improvement of economic condition in general. By the 1990s, gender disparities in China were concentrated in poor rural areas. In poor rural households having more than one child, children have to compete with more siblings for educational resources and the costs of education are a burden on families (Connelly & Zheng, 2007). Many researchers believe that the traditional attitudes and values about girls' and women's abilities and roles in families have a negative influence on rural families' investment on girls' education (Honig & Hershatter, 1988; Wolf, 1985), because parents anticipate old-age support from sons more than from daughters, and many rural families perceive that returns to education will be better for their sons' future than daughters' future (Andors, 1990; Jacka, 1997). Therefore, girls in rural areas are usually allocated fewer educational resources than boys within families, which include financial investment on education and parents' expectation on children's educational achievement; when the educational resources available in a family are very limited, boys usually have the privilege to access the resources (Dong, Li, Yang, & Zhang, 2008; Hannum, Kong, & Zhang, 2009).

The foregoing discussions have indicated that based on the differentiations stemming from a combination of economic situation, institutional arrangement and traditional values, income level, gender and residential area are the important dimensions in understanding educational inequality in China. Attending higher education adds financial burdens to low income families in general, and compared to students in urban areas, students in rural area have more difficulties to access educational resources of good quality. Furthermore, being a girl living in a rural area can pose a dual disadvantage in terms of pursuing higher education. This study pays attention to disadvantaged university students overall, while the findings also seek to provide insights into the extent to which girls are discriminated in their accessibility to education especially in rural areas, and how they perceive and handle the discrimination and barriers.

## **2.4 Inequalities in the Higher Education Recruitment System**

The recruitment system of higher education has long been a focus of scholarly and policy attention due to its direct and profound impact on fairness and equality in distribution of education opportunity. The national college entrance exam (NCEE) is the most crucial determinative mechanism of the higher education recruitment system in China. Since 1952 when the NCEE was first established, there have been constant debates over whether the examination should be abolished, reformed, or maintained. The early missions of the NCEE were to prepare high-skilled personnel and cultivate cadres or future leaders for the nation. The central government strictly enforced admission quotas and stipulated uniform regulations for each step of the admission procedure. There had been debates over whether the university admissions should be centralized or individualized by the end of 1950s, but after discussions, the central government decided to maintain the uniform admission (Yang, 1997, 2003). From 1966 to 1976, in order to ultimately change the elite-selecting standards of higher education into the criteria



privileging peasant and working class, Mao abolished the NCEE during the cultural revolution, and it was restored in 1977. The debates over abolishment of the NCEE were brought up again from early 1990s to now. Fairness related issues in recruitment system emerge as one of the primary focuses among all these debates.

In early 1990s, some scholars advocated a principle of “easy admission but strict graduation” in higher education recruitment (Tang, 1995), but this principle was opposed by other scholars due to concerns that no mechanism can guarantee that an enforcement of “easy admission” wouldn’t result in “easy graduation”, given the profound influence of social connections in all aspects of social life which has been rooted deeply in Chinese culture (Liu, 1995). Some argued that the NCEE is presently the most impartial and highly comparable mechanism in China to select qualified candidates for higher education, and they considered success in the exams as the only access to better educational resources for disadvantaged young people (Lei, 2004; Liu, 1997; Qu & Xiong, 2003). On the other hand, some scholars demonstrated that the national uniform, centralized NCEE could in fact be an impediment to the development of a market economy (Gu, 2001; Huang, 1997). In spite of all the controversies and debates, no one denies that some kind of reform is necessary for the current higher education admission system in China. Since 2001, the Ministry of Education started to carry out “autonomous recruitment reform” in some prestigious universities on a trail basis. The reform challenged the longstanding practice of taking the NCEE score as the sole recruitment criteria. The proponents believed that promoting autonomous recruitment can increase the academic autonomy of higher education, and focus more on investigating candidates’ competence and inner quality (Yao, 2003; Zhou, 2004). However, some other scholars have serious concerns that the autonomous recruitment may bring serious threat to the fairness and credibility of

recruitment. On-site interviews and recommendations from high school principals have been incorporated into this autonomous recruitment system. The public concerns over the involvement of social connections in recruitment processes have been growing, as it was mostly up to the recruiters and high school principals to decide who will be recommended and will be enrolled. Besides, since the multiple selection criteria have been included into this recruitment process to examine students' multifaceted talents, some of which may be only gained through certain training and cultivation provided by their families, and if these standards are widely adopted by higher educational institutions or prestigious universities, young people of lower social classes will have no advantage in such recruitment system, so the chances for them to receive better quality of higher education will be largely reduced (Pang, 2003).

Although it seems that the NCEE recruitment system can impose certain level of fairness on all candidates by excluding involvements of most factors other than the score of the NCEE, it's not difficult to recognize the inequalities brought by this system. I have discussed how economic barrier and uneven quality of education between rural and urban areas have resulted in educational inequality. Actually, the unequal quota system in the recruitment process often exacerbates the disparity in higher educational opportunity between rural-poor and urban-rich as well. A university usually sets a fixed admission quota for each province, and has a higher proportion for its home province, that is to say, the students from university's home province have better chance to get into this university than students from other provinces. According to statistics, there were 1078 postsecondary institutions in North Central Plain and South Central China, and this number was only 475 in other regions (Mao, 2006). Since large majority of higher educational institutions are located in urban centers and economically developed regions, it is clear that higher education is much more accessible for the masses in urban areas and

developed regions than in poor rural areas. Furthermore, under the job assignment system, being admitted into university means that a good quality of life in future can be secured, in other words, the NCEE can be a social mechanism to enforce social division among people by determining one's first employment as white-collar or blue-collar as well as residential status as continuing to be a rural resident or turning into an urban resident. Thus, when higher education is still a scarce resource, one's score of the NCEE makes a great difference in one's fate. Although along with the expansion of higher education and abolishment of job assignment system, the determinant effect of the NCEE has been weakened, a degree from university especially from a prestigious university can still make big difference in young people's school-to-work transition.

## **2.5 Abolishment of the Job Assignment System and Recruitment in the Post-1978 Labour Market**

Since the uniform NCEE system was founded, a primary role of higher education was to prepare high-skilled personnel and future leaders and to facilitate the development of science and technology as well as economic growth. The centralized job assignment system was therefore established to guarantee that university graduates could enjoy the superior social status of a guaranteed tenure. Along with the establishment of the market economy and liberal labour market, a desire for self-choice in seeking employment increased. In 1987, Tsinghua University and a few other universities started to allow their graduates to either accept the job assigned by the government or to look for their own positions. The constraints of the job assignment system loosened even further in the 1990s. The government started to encourage graduates to look for jobs by themselves. In 2000, the job assignment system was abolished and changed into graduate employment policies so that university graduates had to go for individual job hunting based on the demands of labour markets. Nowadays, the government and university, rather than interfere

in employers' recruitment procedure, only provide informational assistance and limited job alternatives when university graduates are facing severe underemployment due to the expansion of higher education and the inflation of credentials.

The consequences of abolishing the job assignment system are: On one hand, university graduates enjoy much more freedom in searching for jobs based on their interests, capacities, and aspirations; on the other hand, in this liberal labour market, they are not guaranteed either superior social status or tenured jobs. Due to the underdeveloped job market, academic degrees are still seen as the fundamental standard for selecting employees, and higher education is still highly in demand. But, after the serious expansion of recruitment quotas in 1998, the labour market cannot digest the dramatic increase of university graduates, and university degree in general has been largely devalued. In order to be more competitive in the labour market, the high school graduates started to compete for admissions to prestigious universities and hot majors. The new university graduates are facing a growing unemployment rate and have to cope with an extremely competitive labour market.

Increasing debates have emerged concerning the issue of the causes of high unemployment rates among new university graduates in recent years. Some writers attribute the abrupt rise of unemployment rate to the imbalance in demand and supply of university graduates in labour markets caused by the expansion of higher education enrollment (Wang & Moffatt, 2008). Others emphasize that the quality of postsecondary education has not been improved correspondingly with the expansion of enrollment, and the knowledge structure of university graduates and the emphasis of academic performance of education in China cannot match the requirements in the labour market (Ding, 2005). According to some media and scholars, the graduates were blamed for holding higher expectations about their postgraduate employment

than they should (Ding, 2005; The China Post, 2011; Wang, 2009). Bai (2006) argues against this blame by putting students' high expectation in social context. He suggests that in a transition process from elite to mass higher education, the gap between postgraduate aspiration and actual job opportunity is inevitable. Besides, in historical context, the Chinese traditionally takes education and degrees, just like the imperial exam in ancient China, as the only channel to change social status and gain wealth and power, thus, it is difficult for students and their parents to disconnect higher degree and higher income and social status. In addition, some researchers have also recognized the tremendous challenges brought by structural changes in labour market. For example, the government's supervision and management has been largely weakened, but as a newly emerging liberal labour market, it has not been able to operate efficiently on its own (W. Wang & Moffatt, 2008); also, the economic structure cannot provide sufficient job opportunities to the growing number of university graduates, as the economic growth in current China still primarily depends on the development of labour intensive industries and infrastructure constructions which have relatively low demand of university graduates, so a transformation to increase the portion of high-tech and tertiary industry in economy is required to increase the employment rate of university graduates (Nian, 2010).

In an immature labour market with little supervision and constraint from government, the employers hold considerable power in recruitment processes, and different kinds of inequality would not be rarely seen in this process (Wang, 2009). Social networks directly or indirectly offered by parents or other family members can privilege the students from higher SES (socioeconomic status) family in job hunting. Through comparing university graduates from cities with those growing up in the rural areas, several empirical studies have demonstrated that students from cities generally have higher level of employment capability than those raised in the

countryside before they go to university, and higher education in China provides little help in narrowing the gap (Cai, 2007; Lai, Tian, & Meng, 2011; Li, 2010; Wen, 2005b). Moreover, the discrimination against female students has also been observed in some employee recruitment and selection processes (Guo, Tsang, & Ding, 2010; Wen, 2005a; Ying & Li, 2007).

## **2.6 Summary**

Two life transitions of Chinese university students are focused on in this study - postsecondary transition to university, and postgraduate transition. In order to understand their postgraduate transitions effectively and sufficiently, it is necessary to discuss participants' experiences in transitions from high school to university. The dynamic interactions among the central government, higher education, and the job market faced by new university graduates have had a profound impact on their postgraduate aspirations and achievements. Traditionally, Chinese education served as the single, narrow channel for members of lower social classes to climb up the social hierarchy and as a medium for the central government to train students and propagate dominant values and ideologies which legitimate and maintain the established social structures and power relations, and set a clear division between higher and lower social classes. To make sure the functions of education can be effectively fulfilled, the central government played an important role in the connections between education and job market through controlling the recruitment processes. In ancient China, the imperial government initiated and organized examinations to stratify the educated and recruit officials for each level of government accordingly. The knowledge structure required by the examinations and provided by education system was highly confined to Confucianism; in this way, civilians' performance in obtaining this knowledge could be directly related to their future occupations and social status. After the People's Republic of China was founded, the central government established bureaucratic

controls over the entrance to higher education and the connections between education and job market for decades, through the NCEE and the job assignment system, to maintain and reinforce the socialist structures. Along with the development of a market-oriented economy, these state controls have been almost removed in the connections between education and job markets for new graduates, and they have also been weakened by the recent reforms of the NCEE and higher education, but they are still prevalent in the higher educational admission system. To some extent, higher education in China is slowly undergoing a functional transition from serving the needs of the nation and government to preparing workforces for job market.

It's not difficult to observe some general trends in education in China. Firstly, Chinese people in general have a strong tendency to pursue more education due to a long-established link between education and social status which has been embedded into Chinese culture. Secondly, expansion of education has increased the educational opportunities for young Chinese people in general, especially after the founding of the PRC, but the cost of higher education has increased dramatically as well. Thirdly, the state's controls over education and job markets have gradually diminished. In spite of all the social and structural changes discussed in this chapter, having a disadvantaged background, such as being poor, living in a rural area, and/or being a woman, persistently and negatively influences a person's educational and employment opportunities. Based on the observation of structural changes and transitions in current China, we may assume that some conflicts and issues may emerge. New university graduates have to face high unemployment rates which may be caused by the lack of effective connections between higher education and job markets. For example, there might be a gap between rising university enrollment and the capacity of job markets to absorb new university graduates, so that higher education does not necessarily lead to higher social status or better quality of life, even though

young people and their parents continue to take for granted the link between higher education and higher status and better life. Also, university students may have tremendous difficulties in dealing with the striking differences between a standardized and examination-based educational system and a flexible and practical job market with multiple standards in its recruitment process. Furthermore, a combination of the expansion and the increasing cost of higher education may provide much more educational opportunities to the rich than the poor, and the inflation of credentials in job markets caused by the postsecondary expansion may push students to compete for entrance into more prestigious universities and different types of resources, so rather than alleviate the inequalities through providing more educational opportunities, the higher education system seems to widen the gap between the rich and the poor. The background factors introduced in this chapter can provide macro-structural contexts for young people's secondary-university transitions and postgraduate transitions. Later, in Chapter 5, I will examine the assumptions above by analyzing how individual students interact with and perceive the social structures in making educational and employment choices. Before that, the next two chapters outline the theoretical and methodological frameworks for my analysis.



## **Chapter III**

### **Theoretical Review and Analytical Framework**

An important focus of this study is the relationship between socioeconomic origin, education and employment, which has been widely studied and discussed in academic and public sectors in western contexts, so a large body of empirical and theoretical English literatures can be found on this subject (Breen & Jonsson, 2005). However, a major challenge faced by this study is the dearth of literature on the dynamic relationships between educational attainment, social inequalities, and social mobility in China's socioeconomic and institutional transformation processes after 1978. As mentioned in Chapter 2, China's transforming political and economic institutions create uncertainties and unpredictable patterns. Thus, it becomes necessary to employ the most feasible ideas and concepts from larger scale of theories and construct theoretical explanatory framework based on the social reality of China.

#### **3.1 Social Stratification Theory and Social Attainment Theory**

This study focuses on educational attainment and different outcomes of educational transitions associated with school-to-work transitions. Social research has been primarily interested in the relationships between education and employment in order to reveal the level of reproduction of social inequality in a given society. Much of this research has been based on explanatory approaches influenced by social stratification and status attainment theories.

Social stratification researchers seek to explore the degree to which ascribed characteristics, such as socioeconomic origins, race, gender, and geographic location, affect educational and occupational attainment, or to focus on the distribution of differential rewards and living conditions. Status attainment researchers are more interested in the mechanisms that lead to the social reproduction of social inequality. A common approach to the study of social

reproduction is to examine the relationship between social origin and the attainment of social position. There are various ways to model this relationship, though the predominant research orientation has tended to emphasize log-linear analysis (Goodman, 1979; Hauser, 1978). Most studies emphasize the ratio of the odds among respondents born into one class origin compared with those born into another, of getting to occupy one social class destination rather than another. Therefore, the ratio of the odds can indicate social mobility. Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) claim that more equal societies are more fluid. For many analysts of social mobility, educational system is the driving force behind changes in social fluidity. They often find strong remaining “origin effects” in models incorporating education attainment (Inshida, Muller, & Ridge, 1995), whereas status attainment tradition often finds that education largely mediates the association between origins and destination (Treiman & Yip, 1989; Warren, Hauser, & Sheridan, 2002). Thus, despite the recognition of educational effects, there is no consensus on the share of education in explaining the total association between social origins to current social positions (destinations), especially when the studies were conducted in different countries.

In developed industrial societies, several studies have focused on how educational attainment is mediating the origin-destination association. It has been found that many western industrialized countries share in a trend toward a decreasing association between social origin and educational attainment (Hout & Dohan, 1996; Jan O. Jonsson, C. Mills, & W. Muller, 1996; Shavit & Westerbeek, 1998; Vallet, 2004), however, there were some variations. Gerber (2000) finds that in post-Soviet Russia, the origin-education association has increased. Erikson and Jonsson (1996) find that the importance of education as the path from the social origin to destination is the strongest in Sweden compared to many other European countries. In the United States (Hout, 1988) and France (Vallet, 2004), the educational inequality can be reduced by

equalization through educational expansion, but as more people attain higher levels of education, the origin-destination association at these higher levels strengthens. Breen and Jonsson (2005) argue that, if there is an association between origins, education, and destinations, the origin-destination association is weaker at higher levels of education, and if the share of the population with higher levels of education expands, then we should expect an overall reduction in the gross association between origins and destinations; however, there are preconditions for this three-way interaction to be present, for example, when the job markets in which degree-holders operate are particularly meritocratic.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, in China, under Mao's egalitarian socialist system, the educational inequality in China was reduced at lower levels of education, but there was no equalization of accessibility to the higher education. Although Mao's egalitarianism reduced socioeconomic inequalities in general (Parish, 1981, 1984; Whyte & Parish, 1984), higher education was still used as a mechanism to maintain a socialist status hierarchy – worker and cadre status. The accessibility to higher education was not based on meritocracy but *virtuocracy* which emphasized loyalty to the Communist Party and proletarian class origin (property-less class origin) (H. Y. Lee, 1991; Shirk, 1984). Thus, during Mao's era, class origin, level of education, and destination were associated in certain way, but due to the emphasis on political and economic egalitarian among large majority of working classes in socialist China, these associations only became significant when comparing workers and cadres or rural and urban residents. The dynamic interactions between and the connotation of social origin, levels of education, and destination in socialist China were substantially different from those in the social stratification and attainment theoretical models applied in western industrialized countries.

After three decades of establishment of market economy and restructuration of social classes since 1978, we may find some trends in China which appear similar to those in western industrialized societies. Firstly, capitalist social stratification emerges. Working classes have been depowered and experienced drastic downward mobility due to privatization of state properties and massive layoffs (Whyte, 1999). New urban poverty strata emerged from laid off labour and migrant peasant workers who have been allowed work in non-agricultural sectors after 1978 (Nee, 1989; Unger, 1994). Those with cadre status – managers and professionals – along with private entrepreneurs, gain increasingly higher socioeconomic status in the rising market economies in rural and urban China (Qin, 1999). However, it is still difficult to define China's middle classes today based on middle class's criteria from an advanced capitalist society – a stable lifestyle, mainstream values, and active participation (Wright, 1997). Despite the complexity and ambiguity in assessing social classes in China, it is not difficult to observe the increasing social inequality and social fluidity in China (Bian, 1994; Bian, *et al.*, 2000).

Secondly, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the decentralization of the educational system has reduced significantly the financial support for the public school system, especially at the lower level of education and non-key-point schools, and resulted in increasing privatization in the education system. However, the actual effects of such privatization on educational inequality have not been properly examined. Thirdly, the central government initiated the expansion of higher education since late 1990s which is seen as an equalization attempt to reduce the association between higher levels of education and social origin by some social attainment and social mobility researchers in the west (Breen, 2010; Breen & Jonsson, 2005), but this higher education expansion is instantly followed by increasing unemployment rate of postsecondary degree holders and decreasing satisfaction with their postgraduate employment. Fourthly, some western

researchers predict that market reforms in China were the hope for change from virtuocracy to meritocracy (Lee, 1991; Shirk, 1984), but this trend is not significant under the devaluation of university credentials in China's current labour market. In general, China's transformations have shown some structural features which are similar to the development of western capitalist societies, including neo-liberalist market economy, decentralization, privatization, and increasing social fluidity, but they have evolved in many directions: the massive migration from rural to urban areas and between economic sectors dramatically increase opportunities for mobility; the rapid market-oriented structural and institutional reforms create tremendous social inequalities, a meritocracy based on educational credentials that once was embraced by labour market after 1978 diminished along with the expansion of higher education; the Communist central government's attempt to equalize accessibility to education through expansion paralleled with its reduction of financial support for public school system and reinforcement of school hierarchy through increasing differentiation between key-point and non-key-point schools, and outcomes of such educational reform have shown as lack of consistent direction. Therefore, I argue that at macro-level, the western empirical and theoretical models of social stratification, status attainment social mobility are far away from providing effective explanation to the complicated interactions between socioeconomic origin, educational attainment, and socioeconomic destination, so grounded research with new theoretical perspectives are needed to help us understand and explain how structures and mechanisms of dramatic social transformations have influenced the associations between socioeconomic origin, educational and socioeconomic attainment among specific social group in China. In this thesis, I focus on the Chinese students who were able to receive university education.

### **3.2 Rational Choice Theory, Its Critiques, and Schutz's "Common Sense Lifeworld"**

One of the most significant trends in the study of inequalities in the 1990s has been the resurgence of rational choice models focusing on decision making (Boudon, 1974; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Gambetta, 1987; Morgan, 1998). Getting into university and obtaining post-graduate aspirations are important decision making processes in individual students' life course. A theoretical explanation which can situate individual dispositions into social structural contexts becomes necessary. A focus on individualized decision making process can provide an account of the discrepancy in educational and occupational attainment among lower SES students, which indicates certain level of social mobility.

According to rational choice theorists, actions are caused by rational, logical intentions, and choices (Elster, 1983). The actor of rational choice theory is egotistical, rational, and purposive in his or her actions, and the decision is always made based on a calculation of cost, benefit and probabilities of success. Therefore, Anisef et al (2000) suggest that various forms of capital which arise from the reproduction of social class must be utilized and invested by individuals, so the individual as an agent can make decisions on how to employ and invest the capital to benefit their goal in their life course transition. Boudon (1974) makes a distinction between the primary and secondary effects of social stratification. He suggests that family background can generate differences in academic ability among students as primary effect, but students and their parents can make decisions on what kind of education they want to receive, and such educational choice is considered as secondary effect. Derived from Boudon, Goldthorpe (1996) advocates what he calls a "weak" version of Rational Action Theory, by viewing education as an investment good, and arguing that, in spite of the expansion of educational opportunities, particularly in higher education, class differences have remained

because there have been relatively few changes in the relative cost-benefit balances for different classes. Goldthorpe's theory (1996) does not depend on the assumption of "perfect rationality", but he believes that rational action remains the dominant principle governing behavior because "propensities to depart from rationality operate randomly in many different ways," (p.485) without deviating from patterned collective behavior. According Hatcher (1998), different social locations caused by economic inequality can give rise to different cost, benefits and probabilities of success. In this case, individual agents are able to make rational decision on their propensities in their life course transition based on evaluation of environmental factors.

Rational choice theory supplements social stratification and social attainment theory in explaining individualized social mobility by interpreting individual decisions as rational choices. However, several assumptions the theory is built on have been receiving severe critiques. Firstly, rational choice theory has to reconstruct an ideal norm which assumes that actor's action is caused by rational, logical intentions, and choices, and the actor is able to completely exclude emotions and sentiments from his/her choice of the most rewarding line of action. Secondly, in rational choice theory, the actor never overlooks a relevant message when acting. This means that, in order to make a rational choice, an actor knows the desirable and undesirable consequences of any given means, or set of ends, knows how an end affects other plans, and knows how these means affect other means and other goals (Garfinkel, 1967; Schutz, 1943).

A major critique of rational choice theory rests on a distinction between the "rational," "reasonable" interests of everyday life and the ideal typical, rational choice actor created by rational choice theorists (Garfinkel, 1967). Following Schutz (1943), Garfinkel (1967) argued that a person's actions guided by the "attitude of everyday life" deviate from the ideal of norms of rational choice theory. Firstly, the rational choice theorists assume that individual actor is able

to eliminate all the structural effects in everyday life when making choices. However, the normative structures of everyday life organize and structure doubt and uncertainty as constraining conditions on interaction (Garfinkel, 1967). Secondly, rational choice theorists tend to ignore how everyday actors use their taken-for-granted, local knowledge about a situation to interrupt the rational lines of action. Thirdly, in everyday life, emotionality, self-feelings, and moods are constituent elements of social experiences. They are taken for granted, acted on, join a person with others, and are presumed to be part of the interactional order. In general, rational choice theory fails to offer a convincing explanation of why its ideal norms of rationality do not fit everyday life, and there is a gap which rational choice theory cannot fill to mingle the two. Therefore, it's important to explore to what extent individual agency is able to practice rational action and what is beyond rationality in agent's decision making process. Even Goldthorpe (1996) himself invites debates on where "the boundaries of the explanatory potential of Rational Action Theory are in principle to be drawn" (p.497).

Schutz (1962) argues that rationality in the strict sense of rational choice theory is only realized in the models constructed by social scientists and other such theorists concerned with the social world, but not in facets of everyday life. For Schutz, actions, rather than being governed by rationality, are rooted in common sense life world. The life world is the "paramount reality" of human existence, in which we come into relationships with others, make decisions, and one day die. The common sense life world means social actors take actions and make choices in the sense all "fellow men" commonly understand. "This world existed before our birth, experienced and interpreted by others, our predecessors, it is an organized world." (Schutz, 1962, p. 7). All interpretation of this world is based on a stock of previous experiences of it, our own or those handed down to us by parents or teachers, so Schutz uses a term of "stock of knowledge at hand"



to typify the common sense world. Although common sense reality forms the matrix for all social action, each individual locates himself in daily life in a particular manner, in light of what Schutz called the “biological situation”. Each person was born into the world with first interactions with parents who provide some guiding elements to one’s segment of experience, and then continues throughout his life to interpret what he encounters in the world in the perspective of his special interests, motives, aspirations, desires, religions and ideological commitment (Schutz, 1967). As Schutz (1967) writes, “the actor’s actual situation has its history; it is the sedimentation of all his previous subjective experiences.” (p. 27). From childhood on, the individual has to constantly use his/her stock of knowledge to understand or at least control some aspects of his/her experiences. Sometimes, a person’s stock of knowledge at hand is more than adequate but for other situations one must improvise, but even improvisation is restricted to the person’s imaginative opportunities which are grounded in the stock of knowledge at hand. Knowledge is socially rooted and distributed, and typifications which comprise one’s stock of knowledge at hand are actually generated out of a social structure. In general, Schutz appreciates that rationality of agency is profoundly restricted by the common sense life world.

Nevertheless, whether Schutz thinks people are primarily not rational is still arguable. Rationality in the strict sense requires actors to select the best means to get to the best goals. However, intentionality adds complexity to the problem of rationality, as the intentional selection of reality in accordance to our purposes means that the means and goals which actors achieve are incomplete subsections of elements in the real world. Therefore, actors can easily miss very important means by which they might enable their goals, and they are likely to achieve a goal without considering other more appropriate goals. However, rather than excluding rationality from human actions and decisions in everyday life, Schutz would agree with Weber’s idea of

rationality as a bounded concept (Weber, Henderson, & Talcott, 1947), so he can on one hand argue against strict rationality in everyday life yet suggest to Garfinkel that a chess game represents a rational activity which is practiced within the preselected elements of reality traced by the intentional stance, but extremely hard to be generalized to outside the boundaries of chess game. In general, for Schutz, although it is possible that rational actions can be taken due to a force of will and conscious effort or the taken-for-granted knowledge has been interrupted by problematic circumstances, under most circumstances the common sense or natural attitude dominates people's daily existence.

### **3.3 Bourdieu's Theory of Practice**

The stock of knowledge is a typification in Schutz's conceptualization of common sense lifeworld. It serves as the agent's "scheme of interpretation" for making sense of the world and experiences, and is product of sedimentations of multiple past experiences anchored in manifold situations and encounters, which is shaped by the material and cultural conditions of existence characterizing the agent's lifeworld. Schutz's understanding of common sense lifeworld may remind us of another widely used sociological term, "habitus".

The first extensive sociological reference to habitus is in Elias's work on "the civilizing Process" during the 1930s, in which habitus refers to human "second nature" that individuals acquire in a process of social learning. In *The Civilizing Process*<sup>5</sup>, Elias linked the bourgeoisie in France to the concept and value of "civilization." As the bourgeoisie rose in power in relation to the nobility, they adopted the values of court society, and they came to express the national self-image so that "civilization" became a tool with which to justify their superiority in the society (Elias, 1969, 1982). Whereas Elias saw the civilizing process as originating in the bourgeoisie,

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<sup>5</sup> Originally published in 1939, the two-volume *The Civilizing Process* was republished in 1969 and its first volume was also translated into English

he also saw it as spreading to the general population, but did not pay much attention to the ways in which the bourgeoisie continues to assert its domination. According to Bourdieu, schools serve primarily to legitimize the dominance of the bourgeoisie. He also argues that the symbolic capital associated with some children's habitus is more highly valued and rewarded by the school than others, simply because the school embodies this habitus. Some theorists analyzed the relationship between Elias and Bourdieu (De-Jong, 2001; Dechaux, 1993). They suggest that Bourdieu was more concerned with illuminating the process of social reproduction, while Elias's major concern was social transformation. For both Elias and Bourdieu, the habitus was a site to articulate social and mental structures and work toward self-regulation. However, their views of habitus were not entirely congruent. The internalized cultural control of the habitus in Elias's work reflects the civilizing process. For Bourdieu, the habitus was a generator of behaviors. The trajectory of the child at school depends on the social constraints of the habitus or the internalized self-regulation it entails as well as the ability of the child to use different forms of capital in his or her capacity.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus refers to

"A system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them" (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 53).

Bourdieu has also used other terms, including "cultural unconscious," "habit-forming force," and "generative principle of regulated improvisation," to designate this concept (Swartz, 1997). According to Bourdieu, habitus results from early socialization experiences in which external structures are internalized, and as a result, the internalized dispositions continue to set the broad parameters and boundaries of people's practices in a stratified social world through

further socialization. Thus, on one hand, habitus sets structural limits for actions; on the other hand, habitus generates perceptions, aspirations, and practices that correspond to the structures of earlier socialization. Field is another important concept for Bourdieu, which he defines as,

“A network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97).

Bourdieu proposes three properties of a field: a forcefield, structured space of positions, that imposes its specific determinations upon all those who enter it to enforce existing rules and regulations and preserve the existing distribution of capital; a battlefield, that is an arena of struggle through which agents and institutions seek to gain bigger share of capital in or overturn the existing structures of distribution; and a third critical property of any field is its degree of autonomy, which refers to its insular nature and ability to uphold its own criteria of evaluation over and against those of neighbouring or intruding fields (Wacquant, 1998). Although these three properties are requisite for any field, each property may weigh unequally in a field at certain times or different spaces (Bourdieu, 1993a).

It's interesting to see that Bourdieu often uses the analogy of game to provide a more intuitive notion of field in his theory of practice. Each actor as the player in this game possesses a pile of tokens of different colours, each colour representing a given type of capital they hold, and the volume and structure of a player's capital determines his or her position in this game and disposition including playing strategy. For Bourdieu (1986), capital is the set of actually usable resources and powers an individual possesses and it is effective in a given social space that enables one to obtain specific profits through participation and contest in it. Capital comes in four principal types: economic capital (material and financial resources at one's disposal), social

capital (resources accrued by virtue of membership in a group, representing one's social networks), cultural capital (cultural resources rooted in social origin, such as language ability, knowledge, information and tastes, which are linked to educational and occupational aspiration) and symbolic capital (resources based on honor, prestige or recognition, as an authoritative embodiment of cultural value) (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Although Bourdieu didn't explicitly discuss rationality in his theory, using game as the analogy of his concept of field implies that to some extent he shares Schutz's confirmation of the possible rationality in human consciousness and actions which can happen in playing chess, but not entirely congruent, since Schutz considers playing chess as a very unique situation, while Bourdieu suggests that game can take place in much broader sense.

Similar to Schutz's conceptualization of common sense life world, Bourdieu's concept of habitus has often been criticized as social determinism. However, it seems that unlike Schutz's emphasis on the restricted boundaries of rationality in human agency in real life, Bourdieu actually even more embraces the possible rational choice and action by discussing fields which actors are circumscribed by and also able strategically to utilize certain objective structures, rules, regularities, and capitals for competing for power. Bourdieu (1990a) also acknowledges that among all principles of production of practice, rational and conscious computation cannot be ruled out under certain circumstances – certainly in situations of crisis which disrupt the immediate adjustment of habitus to field. Furthermore, by identifying four types of capitals, Bourdieu points out the conversion feature of capitals that the different types of capitals can be derived from economic capital and transformed into other types of capital “in accordance with a principle which is the equivalent of the principle of the conservation of energy, profits in one area are necessarily paid for by cost in another” (Bourdieu, 1986). The measure of all

equivalences is “nothing other than labour-time (in the widest sense)” and “the conservation of social energy through all its conversion is verified” (Bourdieu, 1986). Although it is difficult to measure practically conversion rates from one type of capital to another based on Bourdieu’s measurement, we do find that besides emphasizing the domination of habitus in people’s everyday life in his cultural reproduction theory, Bourdieu also explores the role of agency as actors undertaking conscious strategic action.

Essentially, for both Schutz and Bourdieu, one certain problematic circumstance is the precondition of developing and practicing rational strategic agency. In order to look into the possibility of rational agency, it is important to identify what the problematic circumstances are. Bourdieu identifies those circumstances as the situation of crisis, which disrupts the immediate adjustment of habitus to the field. Just like rational choice theorists pay special attention to the “choice” in terms of key institutional transformations and life course transitions, Schutz and Bourdieu’s strategic agency may be enabled in these transformation and transition processes, which can be considered as problematic circumstances with features of uncertainty, tensions, risks, and alternatives. This study is concerned with such a circumstance by primarily focusing on university students’ postgraduate transition in transformation of education and labour market in China.

### **3.4 Applying Bourdieu’s Theory in Empirical Studies**

In recent decades, there has been a considerable coverage of school-to-work transition processes in western academic publications. The transition processes are viewed in a broad sense, covering those leaving secondary level schools and post-secondary institutions, and I found that the western researchers tend to focus more on the former (Heinz, 1993; Marsden & Ryan, 1995; Mills & Gale, 2011; Rosenbaum, Kariya, Settersten, & Maier, 1990; Taylor, 2006, 2007). Some

of the school-to-work transition researchers attempt to help young people acknowledge the situations of the post-industrial labour market and their possible options by identifying patterns in the pathways leading to work and summarizing the trends and challenges in the transition initiatives (Taylor, 2005, 2006, 2007). Some researchers reveal that labour market restructuring leads to increased uncertainty and risk among all young people in undergoing the transitions (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Wyn & Dwyer, 1999), because commodification makes education into a consumer product and while young people have an increasing range of educational options, these are also associated with increased life course risks (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). At the same time, theorists like Beck (1992) points to the importance of how individuals actively negotiate the risks and uncertainties. As the school-work transition patterns become less predictable, the individual agent has to be more self-reflexive and individualized in order to deal with challenges and risks caused by a series of social changes which loosen the traditional structural constraints on young people's educational and occupational choices. While most school-to-work studies focus on the relationship between education and labour markets, many researchers discover that the structural influences are still significant. They explore how these have been internalized in young people's propensities and daily practices by introducing Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital into their analysis of family backgrounds' impacts on student's educational achievements (Bugyi, 2008; Mills & Gale, 2011). Many of them have found that despite the increasingly equal access to education for young people in general, structural factors still play important roles in producing and reproducing the unequal outcome of their educational achievement (Jager, 2009). Recognizing the importance of Bourdieu's notion of habitus and cultural capital, Lehmann employs his theoretical framework in explaining the relationship between structure and agency in school-work transitions (Lehmann, 2004, 2005, 2008).

Lehmann discusses how young people's narratives regarding their decision to become youth apprentices reflect independent choices infused with agency, even though these choices are situated in a context of habitus, cultural capital, and class. He suggests that in the early transition stages, socially and culturally reproductive processes may override institutional differences, and participation in youth apprenticeships was related to parents' relatively low levels of educational attainment and to having grown up in homes which emphasized values associated with manual labour. Furthermore, youth apprentices tended to engage in a process of rationalization in response to public discourses that equate life course success with higher levels of educational attainment; for example, they tended to account for the financial advantages of becoming apprentices through the cost-benefit calculations underlying rational choice theory (Lehmann, 2005). Bourdieu's cultural capital has also been used by Lehmann to analyze the expectations and experiences of a group of Canadian working class, first-generation university students. By identifying the structural disadvantages in terms of economic, social, and cultural capital these young people encountered, he shows how these students draw on their working-class backgrounds to construct uniquely working-class moral advantages, such as strong work ethic, maturity, responsibility, and real-life experiences to overcome structural disadvantages. Ultimately, Lehmann argues that these working-class students hope to transcend their class position with moral dispositions rooted in their social background and upbringing (Lehmann, 2009). Furthermore, Lehmann rightly indicates that while pursuit of higher education becomes the way in which young people and their parents hope for social mobility (i.e. a transformation of habitus), it actually reaffirms their social backgrounds. University for these students is associated with working-class virtues of hard work and value for money, rather than considering it as a natural phase of their life course (Lehmann, 2008).



In general, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, forms of capitals and field can provide a fundamental framework and elements for explaining the processes and patterns of students' educational and occupational decisions and outcomes. However, his emphasis on habitus and cultural capital is often picked on by critics as an issue, especially because of the extent to which Bourdieu claims that action based on habitus, including strategic action, is seemingly undertaken without any consciousness or intention (Crossley, 2001; Reay, 2004; Sayer, 2005). Other critics (Crossley, 2001) recognize that Bourdieu does not deny that there is conscious or "rational" action, but decry that he generally sees it as an exception, separate from the habitus, and only in times of crisis such as when the habitus fails to fit with a situation (Bourdieu, 1990a, 2000). However, these critiques often miss the point. Bourdieu's argument that agents' wills and intentions depend on their positions in social space (Bourdieu, 1981), his claim that the propensity to be "rational" depends on one's habitus and particular conditions of existence, and his assertion that the habitus informs "all thought and action (including thought of action)" (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 64, 2005, p. 64; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 124), all demonstrate that he emphasizes the "generative" capacities of the habitus, and the "conscious" or "rational" actions can only be taken within the schemes of perception and dispositions of the habitus. Since this study tends to explore the patterns of individual choices and actions in a problematic circumstance of crisis, tensions and uncertainties, despite being bounded, certain level of rational thinking and action must be conducted. Thus, to deliberate the pathways from means to goal can be an effective way to explore the variations and patterns of individual strategic agency in undertaking "rational" choices and actions within the schemes of habitus.

### **3.5 Incorporating Merton's Typology of Adaptation**

Bourdieu likes to think of his concepts as Wittgensteinian “thinking tools” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 160), so that new tools can be added into the toolbox, or concepts can be sharpened up in order to better equip us for the task of explaining the processes and patterns of agents’ decisions and outcomes. Merton’s (1957) theory of anomie may offer an effective thinking tool for this thesis. Merton theorizes that anomie and some forms of deviant behavior derive largely from a disjunction between “culturally prescribed aspirations” of a society and “socially structured avenues for realizing those aspirations.” (Merton, 1957, p.188) A key component in Merton’s anomie theory is the typology of individual adaptations to the imbalance between cultural goals and access to institutional means of achieving them. He characterizes five types of adaptations based on the individual acceptance or rejection of cultural goals and institutionalized means (Table 3.1). Merton (1938) introduces his theory by using an example which focuses on the cultural contradiction faced by Americans who are unable to satisfy the key societal goal (money) through socially approved means (work), and tend to commit crime as an inappropriate means to achieve that goal. Merton emphasizes that the categories “refer to role behavior in specific types of situations, not to personality”; he also observes that the categories are not absolutes and that “people may shift from one alternative to another as they engage in different social activities” (Merton, 1957, p.194). His typology was applied into the analysis of decision making processes in coping with the cultural contradiction. Table 3.1 shows that a conformist accepts both the prevailing cultural goals and approved means of achieving them; “innovation” occurs when the individual accepts cultural goals but takes alternative approaches to attain them; “ritualism” combines the abandonment of cultural goals and a deep attachment to the socially approved means;; “retreatism” entails the rejection of both goals and means; finally, “rebellion” substitutes new goals and means for existing ones. The critics argue

that there are some obvious problems with this typology (Besnard, 1990s; Dubin, 1959; Harary, 1966). For example, the rebellion adaptation seems an ad-hoc addition to the four combinations generated by crossing the options of goals (accept, reject) and with the options of means (accept, reject). This typology also fails to show that access to socially acceptable means is a necessary condition for conformity, and leaves ambiguity whether access to these means is a sufficient condition.

Merton himself conceded that the rebellion adaptation is “on a plane clearly different from the others” because it “represents a traditional response seeking to institutionalize new goals and new procedures to be shared by other members of the society” and thus “refers to efforts to change the existing cultural and social structure rather than to accommodate efforts within this structure” (Merton, 1957, p. 140). In his discussion of rebellion, Merton actually begins to make connections between micro-level adaptation to macro-level changes in the normative system by introducing new type of agency into social system. In addition, the critique regarding the conditions of the access to the means is essentially concerned about Merton’s limitation on single means to the goal. In my study, by incorporating Merton’s typology into a model providing explanation on dynamic interactions between micro-agency and macro-structure, his limitations caused by micro-analysis can be overcome, and by focusing on particular group of actors – university students especially with disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, their taken-for-granted goal(s) and institutional means can be identified through data analysis and an overview of structural transformations.

<i>Table 3.1 Merton’s Typology of Modes of Individual Adaptation</i>		
<i>Modes of adaptation</i>	<i>Cultural Goals</i>	<i>Institutionalized means</i>
<b>Conformity</b>	accepted	accepted

<b>Innovation</b>	accepted	rejected
<b>Ritualism</b>	rejected	accepted
<b>Retreatism</b>	rejected	rejected
<b>Rebellion</b>	rejected and replaced	rejected and replaced

Before getting into the in-depth analysis, based on general observations during interviews and an impression gained when transcribing the interview data, I presume that in contemporary China, pursuing higher socioeconomic status and better quality of life has become a primary goal of young people, and education is widely perceived as the appropriate means of achieving this goal for them, especially those who are from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thus, it has become a common sense belief that higher education is the major and secured vehicle by which disadvantaged students are able to achieve intergenerational upward mobility. However, they eventually find out that obtaining higher education provides less and less certainty for them to achieve better quality of life and higher social status during the transformation process. The high unemployment rate of university graduates since 2003 has indicated the existence of the structural tensions, and Merton's typology of individual adaptation can be employed as part of micro-level analysis in the general model to classify different type of agency in coping with post-graduate transition.

Merton's typology can only help classifying agency based on the overt choices made by individual actors, either to reject or accept, but how such choice can be made needs further explanation. In this study, Bourdieu's conceptualization of habitus, capitals, conversion of different types of capital are used to provide further explanation on choice making process for each type of agency.

### **3.6 A Theoretical Framework Based on Literature Review**

The theoretical overview above presents a general discussion on a long standing debate over the dynamic interaction between agency and structure. While social stratification and social attainment theory tend to elaborate the structures of the dynamics in education and labour market which produce and reproduce class differentiation, rational choice theory focuses on individual agency in educational and occupational achievements through theorizing rationality and the process of applying rationality. In attempts to break down the duality of agency and structure, contemporary social theorists pay attention to the dynamic and dialectic relationships between agency and structure. By conceptualizing the primary/dominant form of interactions between agency and structure in guiding people's actions in real life, social theorists like Schutz and Bourdieu largely acknowledge how macro and micro level structures generate tremendous impacts on agent propensities and consciousness externally and internally, and in what way and to what extent agency is produced, reproduced, and structured. Although it is necessary to be fully aware of the tremendous constraints imposed on agency, neither of these two theorists completely deny the existence of reflexive agency and the possibility of rationality in human consciousness. Thus, it is important for us to explore the existence of exceptionality in the routinized everyday life experiences, and look for the actual boundary and room for rational strategic agency not only through important choices in life transitions but also "the dense fabric of micro-choices which comprise the everyday interaction" (Hatcher, 1998). By doing this, we may find out whether or not human agency can develop a critically and rationally aware "good sense" to replace the uncritical "common sense" (Forgacs, 1988, pp. 325-334).

In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of human agency in the context of experiences of life transitions in the micro- and macro- structures of a transforming society, I

hereby provide a hypothesized general analytical framework based on theoretical review. This study starts with an overview of the structural transformations and dynamics of education and post-graduate employment system in historical and modern China, but paying substantial attention to the reform era of China since 1978. The post-1978 China is a society undergoing tremendous social restructuring and transformation. An overt transition from ideologically controlled egalitarianism to social inequality and stratification along with the development of market-oriented economy makes majority of researchers in China more inclined to employ macro-structural approaches to discuss how social transformation and structural change influence young people's educational and occupational choices (Z. Dong, Wang, & Chen, 2009; Hung, Chung, & Ho, 2000; Ma, 2010). The micro-level analysis received little attention from the researchers, even if some micro-level studies have been done without sufficient theoretical explanations (S. Liu & Jiang, 2000). In general, there has been a severe lack of academic literature on young people's life course transitions in China's context. Since the Chinese university student is the target population of this study, the immediate social contexts this population interacting with can be narrowed to education especially university system and entry-level labour market for university new graduates. Acknowledging the importance and comprehensiveness of Bourdieu's theoretical framework in explaining people's educational and occupational choices, I attempt to find out whether or not and to what extent Bourdieu's framework, especially his concepts of field, capitals and habitus, can be applied in China's context. Besides, a significantly dominant ideology has been found based on the review of the relations between education system and social mobility in ancient and modern China, which is that education is the pathway to upward mobility. Since Shutz's discussion of common sense lifeworld, as a effective critique to rational choice theory, can be used to interpret a social life

and dominant ideology sedimented over time, it is necessary to examine whether or not Schutz's discussion of "common sense lifeworld" can be applied in understanding the extent to which students' decision to get into university can be a rational choice, especially in the circumstances of devaluation of university credentials and increasing difficulties in finding a job or a satisfactory job after university. The disjunction between their aspirations for higher socioeconomic status (better job in terms of prestige and money) and the socially structured pathway (higher education) may generate anomie, according to Merton. Thus, Merton's typology of individual adaptation to anomic situation may provide an analytical framework for categorizing individual agency in responding to problematic and challenging circumstances. The ultimate goal of constructing this theoretical framework is to examine the existence of strategic agency in enabling and restricting social contexts, and to explore and analyze the complicated processes of production and reproduction of social stratification among university student population in transforming China.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Epistemology and Methodology**

#### **4.1 Epistemological and Ontological Perspective**

This study aims to investigate the complex and dynamic relationship between structure and agency during the process of crucial life course transition contextualized in intense social transitions. Regarding the empirical methods and emphasis on the relationships of individual and society/subjectivity and objectivity, there have been constant debates over epistemological views in sociology. Listening to the debate between positivists and anti-positivists, especially radical constructivists and postmodernists, we may find each side polarized, opposite the other in extreme ways. Positivists are viewed as adopting realist ontology which views reality existing independent of observer's perceptions and operates according to immutable natural laws that often take cause/effect form. They have been repeatedly criticized as being superficial and naïve because they only look at the observable and isolated manifestations of phenomena, only the surface of things (Bell, 1997). By rejecting the realists' assumption that the true nature of the world could be observed, constructivists embrace the existence of multiple, socially constructed realities ungoverned by natural laws – causal or otherwise (Kuhn, 1962). For constructivists and postmodernists, truth is only the consensus construction of various sources of information that provided the most powerful understanding leading to action. They believe that everything – both truth and goodness – is arbitrary human construction (Rosenau, 1992, pp. 23-24, 114). Constructivism and postmodernism revealed errors of positivism and overcame some of realism's limitations through greater appreciation of the ways in which how the personality, cultural background, and social position of the investigator can shape his or her research, and



more openness to the view that technical knowledge may not contain all of the answers we need in making policy decisions. However, such perspectives also left the position of measurement and progress vacuous, since nothing really exists to measure or to progress toward (Rosenau, 1992).

A reconciliation of positivism and constructivism can only be accomplished by eliminating the arbitrary boundaries and assumptions that separate them. Post-positivism featuring constructive realism became one of the prominent epistemology embraced by many theorists to avoid polarized views on the nature of reality (Bell, 1997; Bhaskar, 1978). Unlike positivism, post-positivism emphasizes the limitations of human capacity to accurately observe and perceive the reality; but unlike constructivism, it assumes both that there is a reality that exists independently of our knowledge of it and that our perceptions of reality is a source, not of certain knowledge, but of “reasonable beliefs” unless they fail to withstand criticism (Musgrave, 1993, p. 284). In contemporary sociology, constructivist realism is proposed as an alternative ontology that accommodates positivism and constructivism and the methods that they subtend.

Ontologically, in this dissertation, I work with the assumption of constructive realism, which suggests two types of reality. One represents the reality itself, the other represents the reality constructed by individual agency; the constructed subjective reality can reflect the independent objective reality to some extent, even though never completely, through critical examinations. Critical examinations can be made through interactions between the two types of reality. For example, in this study, my research population is the Chinese university students who are facing postgraduate transitions, and my focus is primarily on students with relatively disadvantaged backgrounds. Based on the previous literature reviews, there have been considerable numbers of empirical studies and statistics demonstrating that socioeconomic

backgrounds have significant impacts on young people's educational opportunities and career achievements. In addition, the secondary quantitative data used in this study will again examine this finding. The demonstrated significant differences between the privileged and the disadvantaged students in their life experiences and outcomes of life transitions can indicate the existence of social structures and inequalities as an objective reality. This reality becomes increasingly tangible when one tends to interact with or transcend the boundaries set by social and institutional arrangements in practicing their agency, such as fulfilling their aspiration. During the processes of interacting with social structures and institutions, individuals would develop a self-constructed reality based on their social experiences, social relations, and dispositions. According to Musgrave (1993), constructed reality should be considered as a source to contribute reasonable beliefs about real world. Individuals tend to engage in a multitude of reconstruction when explaining decisions in the past, and there is also a tendency to reclaim structurally-bound decisions on one's own. Therefore, narratives of research participants can be considered as constructed reality by agency, which should be acknowledged and understood in the interactions with objective reality.

The concepts of habitus, capitals and field borrowed from Bourdieu provide the generic and fundamental framework for my study to investigate and discover the intricacy of the interactions between agency and structure, and find intermediate ground for connecting subjectivity and objectivity. On one hand, according to Bourdieu (1993b), the positivistic search for laws in each field and general laws is not always unreasonable. The endless fragmentation in classes, socioeconomic status, fields, and subfields help us gain better understanding of why the highly diversified world of modern society is characterized by deep rooted forms of social inequality (De-Jong, 2001). On the other hand, Bourdieu uses the notion of strategy as the

instrument to break away from the objectivists' point of view. He also use notion such as strategy, habitus, and feel for the game to avoid a relapse into subjectivism. For Bourdieu (1990a), strategy is the product of a combination of routine, regulated behavior and irregularities and innovations from important players that fall within the range of the deeper, inner logic of the game. A feel for the game and strategic behavior are important for everyone who is struggling for a better position. People have to prepare the right habitus during a process of socialization to gain a better position. Then they continuously, consciously and more often unconsciously, are learning from or being influenced by their specific, class-related social environment. During the process of interacting with objective reality, we acquire many social practices, roles, norms, values, preferences, beliefs, and insights, and construct our own subjective reality.

#### **4.2 Methodological Strategies and Research Questions**

The primary focus of this study is to explore the dynamic interactions between agency and structure through investigating university students' social and educational experiences and their achievements in postgraduate transitions in the context of transforming China. By focusing on the students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and also not excluding the more privileged students, I was able to observe and explain the diversity of constructed agency in objective social structures and to make in-group and out-group comparisons.

Epistemologically, a constructive realist approach requires both qualitative data to view individual narratives as constructed reality and quantitative data to present aggregate phenomenon as objective reality. Therefore, I am using a mixed method approach for this study. Before doing in-depth analysis on primary interview data, I utilize the secondary quantitative data based on a general survey to provide aggregate evidence of the social structures with a focus

on how socioeconomic family backgrounds affects university students' experiences, decision-making, and fulfillment process of postgraduate aspiration. The statistical results combined with an introduction of the trajectory of educational and economic policy changes in China can provide institutional and structural contexts for the in-depth analysis of individual narratives. Furthermore, a profile of secondary quantitative data can be compared with primary quantitative data which was collected through a brief survey upon completion of each interview, so that the level of representation of my interview sample can be identified. Besides a general comparison between general survey sample and smaller interview sample, qualitative analysis of interview transcripts offers rich descriptive and deconstructive account of how individual students actively negotiate their fulfillment process of postgraduate aspiration based on their positions, capitals, and dispositions, given the social structures and institutions in contemporary China are in transformation process with dramatic and complicated changes in all kinds of social relations.

By making elaborative discussion and combining quantitative and qualitative analysis, I attempt to answer the following key research questions:

1. What are the structural, institutional, social and cultural contexts that shaped higher education and labour market for university graduates in China? In Chapter 2, I address this question by providing an overview of the dramatic social changes caused by social and economic reform in China since 1978 late 1970s. This transformation process has generated tremendous impacts on higher education system as well as labour market for university graduates, which are discussed through introducing the significant policy changes and how these new policies affect students' university attendance and employment situation after graduation. Besides, the structural and institutional tensions must be identified to unfold the tremendous challenges and contradictions faced by young Chinese people, whose life course

including education and employment can be highly affected or even sometimes determined by the way they perceive and handle these challenges. Schutz's notion of common sense life world and Merton's notion of social culture can be applied to explain a dominant value or ideology widely accepted by young Chinese people under the process of socioeconomic transformation. Bourdieu's concept of field is also adopted to understand the dynamics within and between the field of education and the field of labour market.

2. Who are the university participants in China? How different are they in terms of socioeconomic backgrounds, gender, social capitals, cultural capitals, and other important factors? A general answer to this question will be provided in Chapter 5. Examining the relationships between structural factors such as SES factors, gender, and residential area and students' experiences and social positions in university, we are able to find out whether or not the three decades of socioeconomic transformation have demolished the restricted egalitarian system under socialist system and produced a distinct structure of stratification in higher education, and we can tell, therefore, whether or not certain level of reproduction of social inequality can be observed.
3. Given the austere social and structural changes and challenges in higher education and labour market in the process of socioeconomic transformation, how do university students perceive and negotiate with these challenges, and interpret their own agency in their fulfillment of post-graduate goals in comparison with the students coming from relatively well-off family? To pursue higher education, form and achieve post-graduate goals are important decision-making processes and practices in young people's life transitions. Answering this question allow me to interpret individuals' strategic agency in these processes of their life transitions as well as in the context of social transformations. By

drawing on Bourdieu's conceptualization of capitals and habitus, I attempt to explore the extent to which individuals are enabled and constrained by the structural factors in making decisions on and fulfilling goals of education and employment.

4. Given that the majority of the students I interviewed had either successfully achieved their post-graduate goals or failed, and a minority of them were in the process of pursuing it, I would like to identify the variations in students' decisions and decision making processes regarding postgraduate transitions. Receiving the same level of education and sharing similar postgraduate aspiration or even coming from similar family background, why do they eventually take different path in fulfilling their postgraduate transition? I have been talking about interactions between agency and structure in previous research questions, to answer the current question will help me to examine the results of those interactions. By drawing on Merton's typology of modes of individual adaptation, a typology of agency may be generated. Combining answers to question 3 and 4, I may provide more in-depth explanation on why students choose differently and achieve differently during their post-graduate transition processes.

At a macro-level, how do the findings from this study relate to the reform policies of higher education and employment policies of university graduates in China? At a micro-level, how could the findings help individual students gain better understanding of the ongoing structural transformation in higher education and labour market which generate significant impacts on their life course, and how to empower themselves by being well-informed, thinking critically and strategically, and searching for alternatives?

Generally, through providing a comprehensive explanation of the interactions between individual student's agency and social structures in dealing with a challenging circumstance is to fulfill postgraduate transition in the period of socioeconomic transformation, I attempt to explore the possible existence of strategic agency and also to find out that in what ways and to what extent habitus as an embodiment of social reproduction has been embedded into students' decision making process.

### **4.3 Data Collection**

From May, 2009 to July, 2009, in total, I interviewed 40 university students in Xi'an and Lanzhou, China. I used semi-structured interviews, all one-on-one interviews except for two cases with two interviewees at the same time. The relationship between these two interviewees is boyfriend and girlfriend in one interview, and two very close friends in the other. Therefore, I need to examine how one participant's answers might relate to or affect the other's when both of them are interviewed at the same time. All the participants were in their 4<sup>th</sup> year of an undergraduate program, and they were scheduled to graduate in July, 2009. All of them completed a very brief survey on their background information at the end of their interview.

#### ***4.3.1 Selection of Research Sites***

In 2010, there were 792 universities with programs that granted bachelor's degrees, according to The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China<sup>6</sup>. The remarkable number and tremendous diversities of China's universities make it extremely difficult to develop

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<sup>6</sup>The number was retrieved from  
[http://www.moe.edu.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe\\_122/201010/109688.html](http://www.moe.edu.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_122/201010/109688.html)

a research which can provide in-depth understanding of Chinese university students in general. Therefore, I decided to confine my research population with some particular characteristics. One of my major interests is to investigate university students from socioeconomically disadvantaged families, who are supposedly to gain actual upward mobility through their outstanding academic performances. In order to access a considerable population of university students with these characteristics, I decided to choose Xi'an Jiaotong University in Shaanxi province and Lanzhou University in Gansu province as the research sites of this study.

Both universities are located in the less developed western regions of China<sup>7</sup>. For many Chinese people, the predominant image of the western region in China has long been characterized by poverty, infertility, and harsh weather and environment. Such underprivileged location of these universities is significantly related to the socioeconomic background of the students they recruit. By doing data analysis, I will discuss in further that how such images of western regions affect students from different socioeconomic backgrounds in choosing their prospective universities. Nevertheless, Xi'an Jiaotong University and Lanzhou University are two nationwide well-known and prestigious universities even though located in relatively remote area of China. Furthermore, they are both listed in Project 211 and Project 985, which means they are recognized as the top university to cultivate social elites for national economic and social development, and they receive more funding and enjoy certain level of policy preference from national government compare to the unlisted public universities. There are only 38 Chinese universities listed in both Project 211 and 985, and only 3 of them are located in western regions of China, Xi'an Jiaotong University and Lanzhou University are among these three. The general

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<sup>7</sup> In order to boost its less developed western regions, the People's Republic of China launched the China Western Development program in 2000. This policy considered 6 provinces ([Gansu](#), [Guizhou](#), [Qinghai](#), [Shaanxi](#), [Sichuan](#), and [Yunnan](#)), 5 [autonomous regions](#) ([Guangxi](#), [Inner Mongolia](#), [Ningxia](#), [Tibet](#), and [Xinjiang](#)) as the western regions. This region contains about 72% of mainland China's area, but only about 30% of its population, and about 20% of its total economic output in 2009.



features of these two research sites help me gain greater access to the student population I am interested in.

#### ***4.3.2 Collecting Data***

A fundamental focus of this study is to investigate and explain the complicated and dynamic inter-relationships between agency and structure in pursuing higher education and post-graduate goals. In order to address both sides of the structure-agency debate, I adopt mixed methods by using two types of data, quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data allows me to identify and systematically analyze the major structural contexts and social patterns, through looking at the significant impacts the socioeconomic backgrounds generate on university students' educational and employment decisions and choices. The qualitative data offers me opportunity to gain in-depth understanding of the roles individuals themselves play in their decision-making processes and achievements with respect to their education and postgraduate goals. The triangulation that is possible through the use of mixed methods can increase the reliability in my research by providing multi-level assessments of the theoretical accounts drawn upon in this research.

#### ***4.3.3 Quantitative Data***

The first set of quantitative data I use is secondary data. In 2006, a research team of members from the University of Saskatchewan, Xi'an Jiaotong University, and Lanzhou University conducted a survey to investigate Chinese university students' post-graduation plans. This is a general survey targeted on all the students from Xi'an Jiaotong University and Lanzhou University. The questionnaire designed in this project asked most of the questions I'm interested in for my own research, so I decided to use the quantitative data collected through this survey to

provide an aggregate assessment of structural patterns in social mobility and reproduction of inequality.

The second set of quantitative data I use was collected by me through a brief survey upon completion of interview (see Appendix 1). As I mentioned earlier, each participant was requested to fill out a questionnaire after the interview to provide demographic and socioeconomic background information. The data generated from this brief survey can be used to give a profile of the interview participants, and to identify similarities and contrasts between the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of my interview sample and the general student population in these two universities.

#### ***4.3.4 Interviews***

Starting in May, 2009, I conducted individual semi-structured interviews in Xi'an Jiaotong University and Lanzhou University with a flexible interview guide (see Appendix). After arrival at each research site, I firstly got in contact with the student cadres who were introduced by the local professors, and presented them the information letter and invitation letter, so they would have a rough idea about my research topic and criteria in selecting interview participants. They helped me spread out my invitation to participate in this research project through mouth-to-mouth and emails. At the initial stage of recruitment, I focused on seeking interviews with undergraduate students who 1) were planning to graduate in 2009; and 2) were recipients of student loans or grant aided students. Based on these two criteria, I was able to find students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds who have already had relatively clear ideas about or achieved their post-graduation goals. During a period of one and half months, I was able to interview 29 participants who met these two criteria. At the same time, I also asked

the participants to introduce me to other potential participants who were not necessarily restricted to the second criteria so that I would have students from more diversified family backgrounds in my interview sample to be able to make analytical comparisons between socioeconomically disadvantaged students and other students with more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, with regard to the dynamic processes of upward mobility and reproduction of social inequality.

At the end of investigation period, I had interviewed 42 students. Due to my personal contacts with the student cadres who mainly studied in humanities and social sciences, there are only two students studying in the natural sciences. As two cases of natural science students cannot be representatively compose a comparable category as distinct from humanity and social science students, I decided to exclude these cases from my data analysis. The qualitative analysis in this research is based on the 40 interview transcriptions and field notes.

Although I had an interview guide, it was used mostly as a tool to ensure that all interviews covered the same range of topics, themes, and questions, so that I would not miss any key issues during interactions with participants. However, all the participants were also encouraged to raise freely other topics or issues in describing their own experiences, aspirations, and dispositions. The participants were asked to describe their decision-making process in pursuing higher education and choosing university, their university life including studying, working, participating in student organizations and social activities, and affiliating with political party, their perception of higher education, and their post-graduation aspiration and plan. The interview also asked about the influence of parents, relatives, siblings, peers, teachers, and others on the formation of students' dispositions. For developing natural interactions with the participants, the questions were asked in more flexible form in accordance with the way in which

individual participants constructed their narration and personal situation. For example, when asking about post-graduation aspirations and plans, I noticed that some participants' aspirations had become reality while others failed to fulfill their aspiration, and many participants have made their final decision on what they were going to do after they graduated. In these kinds of cases, the questions would be phrased to ask about their decision making processes and their experiences in fulfilling their aspirations.

#### **4.4 Data Analysis**

I personally transcribed the 40 interviews and wrote down the field notes to record the non-verbal communications on site. The language we used during interviews is Mandarin, so the interviews were transcribed in Chinese, and only the quotes and excerpts used in this dissertation were translated into English. I used ATLAS.ti (version 6.0) for my data analysis, mainly as a tool to help me with coding process, easy data access and recall. All the participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity, because this thesis and the reports based on it will be mainly read by English speakers, to make it easier to memorize and differentiate, I give my participants English pseudonyms, although they are all Chinese. In addition, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software is employed for analyzing quantitative data.

When I was doing initial coding for my qualitative data, the emerging themes I noted throughout the data collection and transcription process proved to be helpful. Due to my special research focus on social inequalities and socioeconomic backgrounds, I divided my data based on two variables, residential area (rural or urban area) and gender (male or female), into four groups according to the matrix of the two variables (male students from rural areas, male students from urban areas, female students from rural areas, female students from urban areas). I

keep data in these groups separately at the initial stage of data analysis to reduce the complexity of the analysis. Then, I start to break down the interview data into parts or categories, such as, “experiences of university admission”, “reasons for attending university”, “influences from others”, “resources accessed for entering university”, “perceptions of university education”, “postgraduate goals”, “job hunting experiences”, “difficulties in finding job”, “why difficult to find job”, and so on. Each categorize contains a number of sub-categorizes, for example, “influences from others” includes influences from parents, relatives, friends, or teachers.

The next stage of coding involved more in-depth analysis of single categories for types of agency, contexts, as well as the strategies, problematic consciousness and consequences emerging from the interactions between agency and contexts. Thus, a more theoretical engagement of the data could be developed. Some generic themes and framework emerged, such as common sense values about the connections between education and employment, participants’ confusion and perceptions of tensions and challenges when facing postgraduate transitions, and despite pursuing certain level of independence, they inevitably utilized or searched for different types of resources to achieve their goals. Consequently, based on theoretical literature review and previous analysis, I set up another way of data grouping by using a matrix of participants’ goals (accept or reject the cultural goal) and means (accept or reject the institutional means) in their postgraduate transition processes. And, the initial grouping matrix of residential areas and gender is considered as important intersectional variables across the analysis of all these groups.

Lastly, through analysis and interpretation, some important concepts can be identified, such as different types of capitals and agency, which are largely defined by Bourdieu, and eventually become the core concepts for this study.

## **4.5 Data Profiles and Comparisons**

As I indicated above, there are two sets of quantitative data used in this research. One is second hand data collected through a large sample survey on the post-graduation aspirations of students in Xi'an Jiaotong University and Lanzhou University. The other set of data was collected through a post-interview survey. As this post-interview survey just explicitly asked for interview participants' background information and post-graduation aspiration, by doing some basic statistical analysis, it can provide the participant profiles. In addition, participant profiles of the large sample are presented along with the profiles of interview participants, so that I can make contrast between this small interview sample and the large general sample, and get a sense of the representation of my interview sample.

### ***4.5.1 Demographic Characteristics and Family Backgrounds***

Table 4.1 provides statistical distribution of both interview sample and general survey sample, in terms of demographic characteristics and family background variables. Of the 40 persons in the interview sample, seventeen were interviewed in Xi'an Jiaotong University and 23 were interviewed in Lanzhou University. Male and female participants were equally selected during the recruitment process, but in the general survey sample, male respondents predominated (66.4 per cent were male). Because the general survey was carried out in 2006 and my interviews were conducted in 2009, and the general survey included students in different school years and different level of programs including both undergraduate and graduate programs, the general survey sample covered a larger range of ages than did the interview sample. Almost 88% of interview participants were born between 1985 and 1987, while a similar percentage of survey

respondents were born before 1985. According to the China Census in 2005<sup>8</sup>, minority groups comprised about 9.4% population of mainland China. In my research, I was able to interview 3 ethnic minority students, comprising 7.5% of total participants, while this percentage was 3.4% in the general survey sample. In both samples, ethnic minority students were underrepresented. We can roughly assume that the minority group in China is underrepresented in university. In general, the discrepancy between the interview sample and survey sample is not significant in terms of demographic characteristics, except I controlled the gender ratio in selecting interview participants.

Some major discrepancies may come from the comparisons in socioeconomic backgrounds. In this study, socioeconomic backgrounds are measured by annual household income, parents' occupation, parents' level of education, and residential area before entering university. Firstly, I notice that more than half (58%) of the interview participants come from rural areas, and vast majority of them from villages, while in the survey sample, although students from villages comprised the highest percentage (36.1%) of the total population, the proportion of the students from urban areas (including city and county town) and rural areas (including towns and villages in rural area) is approximately half and half (50.9% vs 48.4%). According to the China Census in 2005, the rural area population made up approximately 56% of the total population in China. Therefore, we can see that even in the universities which are located in relatively remote areas of China, the students from agricultural background are still under-represented; only when I controlled the sample to focus on the students from socioeconomically disadvantaged family, did the students from rural area become the majority consistent with the proportion of the agricultural population at a national level. With respect to

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<sup>8</sup> "National Census Report China, 2005" Retrieved on June 20, 2011, from Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cept/chn/xwdt/t240927.htm>.

father's and mother's occupation, the percentage of peasants in the interview sample is significantly higher than that in the survey sample. Therefore, in later discussion, the economic and educational gaps between rural areas and urban areas in China will be one of the most striking structural factors associated with social inequality in this research.

In 2007, per household annual income in China was approximately 20,000 yuan<sup>9</sup>. However, the percentages of students who were from households lower than this average annual income are 65% and 67.2% in the interview sample and survey sample, respectively. This phenomenon echoes the general perception of disadvantaged economic situations in Xi'an and Lanzhou. It also can be confirmed by qualitative data analysis that these two universities are more likely to be chosen by the students from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds, due to a combined consideration of living cost, university's prestige, and potential funding preference given by highly emphasized educational and economic policies for developing the western regions of China. With respect to parents' education, I didn't find significant discrepancies between the two samples. In general, there were close to 80 per cent of participants whose father had never received post-secondary education, while the percentage for mothers was about 90 per cent. That is to say, we have a large majority of participants who can be considered as a first generation student, which means neither of their parents ever received post-secondary education. Overall, the participants showed relatively disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds in both interview sample and survey sample; for example, the majority of participants were from a household with annual income below national average, a large proportion of their parents are

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<sup>9</sup> [http://news.cnwest.com/content/2009-09/26/content\\_2438073.htm](http://news.cnwest.com/content/2009-09/26/content_2438073.htm)



working as peasants or workers in factory or service sectors, and furthermore, a large majority of participants are first generation students.

In discussing family background, besides socioeconomic background variables, I also used other four variables: whether or not respondents were the only child of parents, whether or not they were the first in immediate family to enroll in university, whether or not they receive student loan and/or student subsidies, and whether or not parent(s) or relative(s) were members of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The third variable may not directly indicate family background, but demonstrated disadvantaged family financial situation is the top criterion for granting student loan or student subsidies. Also, I included the latter two variables only in the post-interview survey. Regarding the first variable, I surprisingly find that in both samples, more than 70% of participants have sibling(s), with just over 20% the only child of their parents. This result truly counters my expectation, as I had expected a large majority of only child cases, considering the one-child policy in China has been implemented continuously since 1979. Nevertheless, when examining the association between single child variable and residential area, I noticed that in the city area, most of the respondents are the single child, but having siblings becomes dominant in the population from county town and rural areas, and of the participants from villages in both samples, as many as 90% are not single children. Having elder siblings who attended university may explain why 45% of the participants reported not being the first in immediate family to attend university when only 5% of the participants reporting their parent have ever received university or higher level of education. As I intentionally focused on accessing the students who has ever received student loan or subsidies at initial recruitment stage, I was able to interview 24 students (60 percent) in this category. The membership of the CPC in China does not only indicate one's political orientation, but also increases one's chance to obtain

a higher social status, even if not necessarily. The CPC is the founding and the only ruling political party in China, and the recruitment process of the CPC member has been relatively restrictive in general, but also widely and institutionally promoted among university students, and the selection criteria are mainly based on one's merits, academic performances, and ideological beliefs. In labour market, sometimes, the employers would give a CPC member more credits compared to others who do not have CPC membership, and especially in public sectors, a CPC membership can be an important or even necessary standard for promotion. Thus, due to the significant meaning of CPC membership in one's life chance and belief, I included parents' or relatives' CPC membership as a measurement of family background. Based on a rough comparison between mothers' and fathers' socioeconomic status (SES) through the general survey sample, fathers in general shows higher SES than mothers, in terms of occupational prestige, level of education, and CPC membership.

**Table 4.1**  
*Statistical Distribution of Interview Sample and General Sample by Demographic Characteristics and Family Background*

Interview sample			General Survey sample 2006		
	N	%		N	%
<b><i>University</i></b>			<b><i>University</i></b>		
Xi'an Jiaotong University	17	42.50%	Xi'an Jiaotong University	3000	56.3%
Lanzhou University	23	57.50%	Lanzhou University	2327	43.7%
Total	40	100%	Total	5327	100.0%
<b><i>Gender</i></b>			<b><i>Gender</i></b>		
male	20	50%	Male	3537	66.4%
female	20	50%	Female	1777	33.4%
Total	40	100%	Total	5314	99.8%
<b><i>Year of Birth</i></b>			<b><i>Year of Birth</i></b>		
			Earlier than 1980	551	10.5%
1980	1	2.50%	1980-1984	4039	76.9%
1985	7	17.50%	1985	498	9.5%
1986	16	40%	1986	130	2.5%
1987	12	30%	1987	29	0.6%
1988	4	10%	1988	4	0.1%

Post 1990	0	0%	post 1990	4	0.1%
Total	40	100%	Total	5255	98.6%
<b><i>Nationality</i></b>			<b><i>Nationality</i></b>		
Han	37	92.50%	Han	5044	94.7%
Minority	3	7.50%	Minority	230	4.3%
Total	40	100%	Total	5274	99.0%
<b><i>Where from</i></b>			<b><i>Where from</i></b>		
city	7	17.50%	City	1541	28.9%
county town	8	20%	county town	1174	22.0%
town in rural area	2	5%	town in rural area	656	12.3%
village in rural area	23	57.50%	village in rural area	1924	36.1%
Total	40	100%	Total	5295	99.4%
<b><i>Annual Family Income</i></b>			<b><i>Annual Family Income</i></b>		
less than 3,000 yuan	1	2.5%	less than 3,000 yuan	636	11.9%
3,001-5,000 yuan	7	17.5%	3,001-5,000 yuan	669	12.6%
5,001-10,000 yuan	7	17.5%	5,001-10,000 yuan	886	16.6%
10,001-15,000 yuan	9	22.5%	10,001-15,000 yuan	768	14.4%
15,001-20,000 yuan	5	12.5%	15,001-20,000 yuan	621	11.7%
20,001-30,000 yuan	5	12.5%	20,001-30,000 yuan	568	10.7%
30,001-50,000 yuan	4	10.0%	30,001-50,000 yuan	392	7.4%
50,001-100,000 yuan	1	2.5%	50,001-100,000 yuan	201	3.8%
more than 100,000 yuan	1	2.5%	more than 100,000 yuan	178	3.3%
Total	40	100%	Total	4919	92.3%
<b><i>Father's occupation</i></b>			<b><i>Father's occupation</i></b>		
Government Cadre	3	7.5%	Government Cadre	387	7.3%
Enterprise manager	1	2.5%	Enterprise manager	114	2.1%
Teacher	3	7.5%			
Nurse	0	0.0%	Professional & technical person	695	13.0%
Office worker and staff	3	7.5%	Office worker and staff	483	9.1%
Private business owner	2	5.0%	Private business owner	111	2.1%
Service and factory worker	5	12.5%	Service and factory worker	972	18.3%
Peasant	20	50.0%	Peasant	1803	33.8%
Self-employed	3	7.5%	Self-employed	388	7.3%
Unemployed/retired	0	0.0%	Unemployed/retired	255	4.8%
Total	40	100%	Total	5259	98.7%
<b><i>Mother's occupation</i></b>			<b><i>Mother's occupation</i></b>		
Government cadre	1	2.5%	Government cadre	125	2.4%
Enterprise manager	1	2.5%	Enterprise manager	39	0.7%
Teacher	3	7.5%			
Nurse	1	2.5%	Professional & technical person	547	10.3%
Office worker and staff	2	5.0%	Office worker and staff	347	6.5%
Private business owner	1	2.5%	Private business owner	45	0.8%
Service and factory worker	1	2.5%	Service and factory worker	968	16.3%

Peasant	24	60.0%	Peasant	2243	42.1%
self-employed	0	0.0%	Self-employed	366	6.9%
Unemployed/retired	6	15.0%	Unemployed/retired	588	11.0%
Other	0	0.0%	Other	78	1.5%
Total	40	100%	Total	5247	98.5%
<b><i>Father's Education</i></b>			<b><i>Father's Education</i></b>		
No school/some primary school	1	2.50%	no school/some primary school	207	3.9%
primary school	7	17.50%	primary school	645	12.1%
middle	9	22.50%	Middle	1405	26.4%
high school/technical secondary school	12	30%	high school/technical secondary school	1845	34.6%
college	9	22.50%	College	663	12.4%
university or higher	2	5%	university or higher	537	10.1%
Total	40	100%	Total	5302	99.5%
<b><i>Mother's Education</i></b>			<b><i>Mother's Education</i></b>		
no school/some primary school	5	12.50%	no school/some primary school	646	12.1%
elementary school	11	27.50%	elementary school	1102	20.7%
middle	11	27.50%	Middle	1288	24.2%
high school/technical secondary school	9	22.50%	high school/technical secondary school	1619	30.4%
college	4	10%	College	414	7.8%
university or higher	0	0%	university or higher	227	4.3%
Total	40	100%	Total	5296	99.4%
<b><i>Only Child</i></b>			<b><i>Only Child</i></b>		
yes	9	22.50%	Yes	1338	25.9%
no	31	77.50%	No	3838	74.1%
Total	40	100%	Total	5176	97.2%
<b><i>Parent(s)/Relative(s) as CPC member</i></b>			<b><i>Father's party membership</i></b>		
Both/one parent(s)	6	15.0%	Yes	1982	37.2%
Grandparent(s)	4	10.0%	No	3294	61.8%
Extended Relative(s)	5	12.5%	Total	5276	99.0%
None	27	67.5%	<b><i>Mother's party membership</i></b>		
Total	40	100%	Yes	753	14.1%
			No	4487	84.2%
			Total	5240	98.4%
<b><i>Student Loan/Student subsidies</i></b>			<b>N/A</b>		
yes	24	60%			
no	16	40%			
Total	40	100%			
<b><i>First in immediate family to attend Univ.</i></b>			<b>N/A</b>		
yes	22	55%			
no	18	45%			
Total	40	100%			

#### ***4.5.2 Achieved Characteristics and Post-graduation Aspirations***

According to Bourdieu, the system of dispositions people acquire depends on the position(s) they occupy in society. I have given profiles of student participants' socioeconomic positions which are mainly endowed with their family background. In addition, some self-achieved characteristics can also complicate the positions they occupy in society, more specifically, in university. Therefore, profiles of these characteristics are presented here in Table 4.2. Of my interview sample, 20 participants (50 per cent) have gained full membership in the CPC, and there were 12 participants (30 per cent) actively applying for this political membership, that is to say, only 20% of the participants had no intention to join the CPC. Of the general survey sample, 35.3% were full members of the CPC. It shows that there has been significant a proportion of university students interested in gaining this political identity. In both interview and survey sample, I have got 30 to 40 per cent of respondents claiming that they have ever been student cadre in university. Actually, the definition of student cadre is not very clear. Generally speaking, having position as student executive at levels of department, college, or university is usually considered as being student cadre. The identity of student cadre implies more advantaged social and academic status compared to the average student in a university context. By analyzing the resources accrued by virtue of the identities of the CPC member and student cadre, I will elaborate how these achieved positions or identities bring resources to help students in finding jobs and applying for graduate school.

The goals that students set for themselves after they graduate, and the reasons they express for having these goals, constitute the primary focus of this study. A general profile of participants' goals is presented in Table 4.2. In my interview sample, half of the participants decided to look for a job after graduation, and some of them may have signed a job contract

already. Among the other half, the vast majority of them (45 per cent) decided to pursue graduate study in China, and one decided to study abroad. We find a similar pattern in the general survey sample, but looking for job is a more dominant option among university graduates, and pursuing graduate study in China is the second, but we have relatively considerable percentage of students having goals to study abroad or having other options. I want to explain a bit why I recruited significantly higher percentage of students who wanted to get into graduate study compare to general survey sample (45% vs 28%), as this issue is quite relevant to the representation of my interview sample. Firstly, I was only looking for students at 4<sup>th</sup> year of university, and at the time I was collecting data, they were going to graduate in two months, so the students who would like to accept my interview mostly have already settled their plans, since they had more spare time and were more likely to share their experiences in working toward their goals; secondly, the students who decided to get into graduate school had either received the admission or not, since similar to the National College Entrance Exam, the Graduate School Admission Exam for all graduate schools takes place nationwide on the same dates, so they may have more spare time than those who were looking for jobs; thirdly, another possible reason might be the expansion of graduate programs in Chinese universities starting after 2006 when the general survey was conducted.

The most significant discrepancy between the interview sample and general survey sample is the percentage distribution of participants' major. As I introduced before, all my interview participants came from social sciences or humanities backgrounds, with more than half of them studying Chinese literature or sociology, and the rest of them taking economics, law, history, philosophy, and Japanese language and literature. However, of the general survey sample, only 18 per cent of the respondents were taking social sciences or humanities (Table 4.2).

The low participation rate of social sciences and humanities students in the general survey reflects the reality that sciences and technology disciplines are remarkably dominant in higher education. Xi'an Jiaotong University has historically been recognized as being much more advanced in sciences and technology disciplines, and it has only started to emphasize the development of social sciences and humanities in recent years. Compared to Xi'an Jiaotong University, Lanzhou University is relatively comprehensive in terms of the development of social sciences, humanities, sciences, and technologies.

**Table 4.2**  
*Statistical Distribution in Interview Sample and General Sample by Social Identities and Post-graduate Aspirations*

Interview Sample			General Sample 2006		
	N	%		N	%
<i><b>Political Identity Status</b></i>					
CPC Member	20	50.0%	member of the CPC	1881	35.3%
CPC Member Candidate	11	27.5%	member of the CYLC <sup>10</sup>	2910	54.6%
CPC Membership Applicant	1	2.5%			
Other Party Membership	0	0.0%	member of other Parties	36	0.7%
No Party Affiliation	8	20.0%	No Party Affiliation	449	8.4%
Total	40	100%	Total	5276	99.0%
<i><b>Student Cadre</b></i>					
yes	13	32.5%	Yes	2501	46.9%
no	27	67.5%	no	2720	51.1%
Total	40	100%	Total	5221	98.0%
<i><b>Postgraduate Goals</b></i>					
Find a job	20	50.0%	Find a job	3156	59.2%
Pursue graduate study in China	18	45%	Pursue graduate study in China	1496	28.1%
Pursue graduate study abroad	1	2.5%	Pursue graduate study abroad	298	5.6%
Other	1	2.5%	Other	212	4.0%
Total	40	100%	Total	5162	96.9%
<i><b>Major</b></i>					
Chinese literature	11	27.5%	Chinese literature	270	5.1%
sociology	10	25.0%	Education	61	1.1%
law	4	10.0%	law (including sociology)	267	5.0%

<sup>10</sup> The CYLC refers to Communist Youth League of China. It is an organization in the PRC for youth between the ages of fourteen and twenty-eight, run by the CPC. Vast majority of school students in China join the CYLC during their high school period.

history	4	10.0%	History	53	1.0%
philosophy	4	10.0%	Philosophy	35	0.7%
economics	4	10.0%	Economics	269	5.0%
Japanese language and literature	3	7.5%			
Total	40	100%	Science	731	13.7%
			Engineering	2013	37.8%
			Agriculture	30	0.6%
			Medicine	985	18.5%
			military science	4	0.1%
			Management	559	10.5%
			Total	5277	99.1%

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With an understanding of the participants of this study, I am able to present and discuss the findings from the quantitative survey data and the interviews in the following chapters. I begin my analysis and discussion with quantitative data, to discuss whether and to what extent the socioeconomic background factors would affect students' university experiences and postgraduate achievements.



## **Chapter V**

### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

#### **5.1 Definition of Socioeconomic Background and Disadvantaged Student Population**

According to the statistics provided in Chapter 4, the general survey sample makes up about 10 percent of total student population in two universities, so it is possible to discover some general patterns through analyzing the general survey data, regarding whether and how social structures affect individual agency in accessing or possessing resources. Before getting into data analysis, I would like to discuss the operational definitions and measurements of some important variables. As mentioned earlier, this study tends to examine how socioeconomic backgrounds make different in a university student's educational experiences and postgraduate transition, and it has a special focus on the socioeconomically disadvantaged student population, so it is important to define what socioeconomic backgrounds refer to and to identify who are the disadvantaged student. Due to the ongoing social transformation, it is very challenging for social researchers to provide criteria and the assessments for classifying China's population. By mixing neo-Marxist concepts of ownership and control, Weberian concept of authority, and Bourdieu's concept of expertise, Lu (1989, 2001) identifies eight emerging rural classes, including rural cadres, private entrepreneurs, managers of township and village enterprises, household business owners and individual industrialists and commercialists, professionals, employees in collective industry and migrant peasant-workers, wage labour in local private sector, and peasants living on agricultural product income. However, this classification is still subject to the ongoing social transformations in China. Regarding the urban population, based on literature review, rather than setting up criteria to identify each emerging class, Bian (2002) focuses on the major trends in the

formation of social classification in transforming China, including the differentiation and de-empowerment of the working class, the embourgeoisement of administrative and managerial cadres, the patronization of capitalist entrepreneurs, the ambiguous class status of intellectuals, and middle class in developing process. To be more specific, during the transition to market-oriented economy, working class's status of "leading class" in socialist system has been deprived, and a large number of state-owned enterprises were privatized, and countless workers in the state sectors got laid off. The private enterprises have expanded tremendously in the post-1978 transformation process, and they only want to hire labours at lowest cost by keeping wage as low as possible and leaving them unprotected. Nowadays, the working class occupies the low status in the hierarchy of China's urban society, and a new urban poverty stratum emerges from the layoff and retried labour (Zhang, 2000). At the same time, the administrative and managerial cadres and entrepreneurs have been widely recognized as the upper class, but the middle classes in China have yet been formed based on the standards of their counterparts in an advanced capitalist society – a stable lifestyle, mainstream values, and political participation (Wright, 1997, pp. 23-26). Generally speaking, in terms of occupational status, peasants living on agricultural product income, peasant migrant workers, the working poor, and the jobless can be considered as the lower social class in China.

Based on the review and analysis in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, low family socioeconomic status (SES) can indicate disadvantaged backgrounds, and that is mainly measured by family income level, parents' occupations, and parents' level of educations. The occupations including cadre, business owner and manager, the self-employed, professional and technical person, worker/staff, peasant, and the unemployed, are ranked from the upper to the lowest. Through reviewing the previous literatures, researchers haven't gained a consensus on how to rank the occupations in a

transforming China due to constant and dramatic social changes, but there can be a rough perception of the stratification. Although the social status and employment of these university students' parents were restructured dramatically, they have gradually settled after undergoing 30 years of economic reform. Generally speaking, cadres and enterprises are the ones at the top, possessing political and economic powers; majority of the self-employed have done well economically as an emerging social group, due to policy preference after economic reform launched; professional and technical persons in average have relatively stable jobs and fair wages; the working class have lost their privileges and can only obtain unstable jobs and relatively low wages; and the peasants have always been considered as a lower class compared to the working class due to urban-rural divisions. In addition to the low family socioeconomic status, the previous review and analysis show that women and residents living in rural areas are also socioeconomically marginalized and disadvantaged in current social and economic structures, so gender and residential areas before university are included in background characteristics as well. In general, this chapter aims to 1) use socioeconomic background factors including family annual income, parents' occupation and level of education, residential area before university, and gender as independent variables, to examine the variation of university experiences among the university student in terms of their socioeconomic backgrounds; 2) to examine how background factors and university experiences affect their postgraduate employment opportunities; and 3) to explore gender differences in terms of how background factors influence postgraduate employment opportunities.

## 5.2 Findings

Table 5.1 examines the bivariate associations between gender and residential area before taking into account of university and family socioeconomic status. Many results echo the conclusions observed in previous literatures. Regarding the gender differences among university students, based on all the significant associations shown in table 5.1, female students in general have relatively better socioeconomic background than male students. To be more specific, compared to male student, there are significantly higher percentages of female students coming from families with average or high income levels, and with one or both parents having postsecondary education. More importantly, male students have significantly higher percentages of parents as peasant than their counterpart female students, and also majority of male students come from rural areas (53.9%), while majority of female students come from urban areas (61.4%). All these findings may indicate that girls from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to attend university than boys, and this is especially true in rural areas.

Table 5.1 also presents the associations between residential areas before university and other background characteristics. It can be demonstrated again that students from urban areas are more likely to have higher socioeconomic status compared to those from rural areas. To be more specific, significantly higher percentages of urban students come from families of income levels on and above average, with parents having secondary education or above and working in the higher ranked occupations, such as administrative and managerial cadre, business owner, and professional and technician. It is self-evident that rural students' parents are predominantly peasants.

**Table 5.1 Bivariate relationships between Gender, Residential area, and Socioeconomic Background**

Table 5.1 Bivariate Relationships between Gender, Residential area, and Socioeconomic Background				
Socioeconomic Background	Gender		Residential area before university	
	Male	Female	Urban area	Rural area
<b>Family Annual Income Level</b>				
Very low	28.8%	22.0%	14.0%	39.4%
Low	46.5%	45.7%	44.4%	48.2%
Average	17.3%	23.9%	29.6%	9.2%
High	3.7%	4.7%	7.2%	0.9%
Very high	3.6%	3.6%	4.9%	2.3%
	3277	1633	2466	2432
	Chi-square = 46.096* G = .149*		Chi-square = 699.4* G = -.569*	
<b>Parents' Education Level</b>				
Both less than elementary school	13.9%	9.8%	5.4%	20.0%
One parent with secondary education	23.4%	19.2%	10.7%	33.8%
Both parents with secondary education	40.0%	42.5%	43.0%	38.5%
One or both parents with postsecondary education	22.7%	28.5%	40.8%	7.7%
	3515	1768	2703	2571
	Chi-square = 42.989* G = .147*		Chi-square = 113.5* G = -.667*	
<b>Father's Occupation</b>				
Cadre	6.6%	9.1%	13.6%	1.0%
manager/business owner	4.3%	4.4%	7.4%	1.0%
Self-employed	7.6%	7.1%	7.7%	7.2%
Professional/technical person	13.5%	13.2%	17.1%	9.3%
Worker/Staff	24.8%	33.9%	40.9%	14.4%
Peasant	38.1%	27.9%	6.0%	64.7%
Unemployed	5.1%	4.5%	7.4%	2.3%
	3454	1745	2649	2537
	Chi-square = 80.277* G = -.112*		Chi-square = 213.9* G = .576*	
<b>Mother's Occupation</b>				
Cadre	2.1%	3.1%	4.6%	0.2%
manager/business owner	1.5%	1.7%	2.8%	4.0%
Self-employed	7.2%	6.8%	8.3%	5.8%
Professional/technical person	9.2%	13.4%	16.6%	4.4%
Worker/Staff	21.2%	28.1%	39.2%	7.3%
Peasant	47.7%	34.9%	9.6%	78.3%
Unemployed	11.1%	12.1%	18.8%	3.7%
	3445	1715	2612	2535
	Chi-square = 90.579* G = -.125*		Chi-square = 255.8* G = .426*	
<b>Residential area before university</b>				

Urban areas	46.1%	61.4%
Rural areas	53.9%	38.6%
	3517	1769
	Chi-square = 110.3*	
	G = -.301*	
	* Significant level < 0.01	

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### 5.2.1 Background Characteristics and University Experiences

Tables 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5 present the bivariate relationships between background characteristics and students' university experiences. The background characteristics include family annual income level, parents' education level, father's occupation<sup>11</sup>, residential area before university, and gender. As mentioned in Chapter 4, national statistical data shows that by 2008, the per capita income of rural residents has increased to approximately 5,000 *yuan*; while the per capita income of urban residents was approaching 20,000 *yuan*. Based on these two numbers and the 9 categories of family annual income from the original survey, I re-classify the income levels into 5 categories, including very low (less than 5,000 *yuan*), low (5,000 *yuan* - 20,000 *yuan*), average or a bit above (20,000 *yuan* – 50,000 *yuan*), high (50,000 *yuan* – 100,000 *yuan*), and very high (more than 100,000 *yuan*).

Table 5.2 shows that family income level has significant and positive impact on students' English proficiency, obtaining certificate of College English Test (CET) Band 4 and/or Band 6<sup>12</sup>, pursuing dual-degree, being student cadre, participation in social activities, and important social networks. In other words, the students from wealthier families are more likely to be good at and

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<sup>11</sup> Only father's level of education and occupation are included due to little meaningful discrepancy in the statistical results between father's and mother's data, additionally, father's situation has usually been considered as the primary indicator of parental situation in conventional socioeconomic status attainment studies.

<sup>12</sup> The College English Test (CET) is a national test of English as a Foreign language in the People's Republic of China. The CET consists of the "Band 4" (CET 4) and "Band 6" (CET 6) to evaluate English skills in listening, reading and writing of college/university students who are not in English major. In many nationally recognized universities, the CET 4 certification is mandatory. Obtaining CET certificates is important for postsecondary students, as many employers in China prefer applicants with such certification.

pay attention to English, more likely to be student cadre and participate in social activities, and more likely to possess social networks which are useful for job hunting, such as family members and friends. Although academic standing, major, and likelihood of having work experiences appear to be significantly associated with family income level, it is difficult to synthesize significant patterns based on the percentages presented in this table. In addition, family financial background shows no significant influence on whether or not receiving scholarship, obtaining certificate of occupational qualification, and whether or not they are a CPC member.

Table 5.3 shows that the factors including English proficiency, whether or not they obtain CET 4 or/and 6 certificate, dual-degree, certificate for certain occupational qualification, work experience, student cadre status, participation in social activities, and important social networks, are all significantly associated with parents' education level. In other words, the higher education level the student's parents have, the more likely they would be good at English, pursue more educational and occupational credentials, gain work experience during studying, become student cadre, participate in social activities, and have important networks for job hunting. Furthermore, parents' education level seems to have no significant impact on what major the student is taking, whether or not they receive scholarship, their academic performance in university, or whether or not they join the CPC.

Table 5.4 examines the extent to which father's occupation may have impact on students' university experiences. Firstly, father's occupation shows significant association with students' major. Although large majority of students are studying in sciences and engineering, the students having father working in professional field or as technical person are most likely to choose sciences or engineering as their major, among the students specialized in business, finance and management, their fathers are more likely to be a senior manager/business owner and self-

employed. Among the students taking social sciences and humanities as their major, their fathers are more likely to be peasant, senior manager/business owner, or cadre. Furthermore, students coming from a peasant's family are least likely to pursue or possess dual-degree, while the children of cadres or business owner/senior manager are most likely to pursue or obtain dual-degree. The similar pattern can be found in the associations between father's occupation and students' level of English skill, whether or not they are student cadre, and participation in social activities. In other words, on one hand, peasants' children has highest percentage in having poor English proficiency, not obtaining CET-4 or/and CET-6, never being a student cadre, and rarely participating in social activities; on the other hand, these percentages for students whose father is a government cadre, senior manager or business owner are the lowest among all the respondents. Also, compared to other students, the student having father who is peasant or unemployed is more likely to gain work experience but possess little social network which is important for their job hunting, and those whose father is government cadre, senior manager, or business owner are most likely to be a member of the CPC.

Table 5.5 examines the differences of gender and residential area among university students in terms of their university experiences. Again, it demonstrates the relatively disadvantaged situation of being residents in rural area, especially in terms of the level of English skill, possibility of acquiring dual-degree, possibility of becoming a student cadre or CPC member, frequency of participating in social activities, and the accessibility of important social networks. Compared to the students living in urban areas, the students coming from rural area are much less likely to be good at English and to obtain the CET-6 certificate, they show less interest in pursuing dual-degree, have less chance or less interest to become a student cadre or a CPC member, or to participate in social activities, and they were less likely to have social



networks which are important for finding job. The gender differences have been quite significant in their choice of major, whether or not have received scholarship, academic standing, level of English skill, whether or not have work experience, possibility of being the CPC member, frequency of participating in social activities, and accessibility of important social networks. Contradictory to the assumption that the female students might be in relatively disadvantaged position, they are actually doing better than male students at university in a few aspects. The female students are more likely to get scholarship, to be good at English, to gain work experiences, and to join the CPC. The gender differences are also shown in terms of choice of major, participation in social activities, and important networks for job hunting. To be more specific, male students predominantly study in the disciplines of sciences and engineering (77.7%), and compared to male students, female students are much more likely to choose business, finance, management, social sciences or humanities as their major. Furthermore, although the percentages showing strong interest in participating in social activities are similar between male and female students, female students tend to attend more social activities than male students in general (47.4% vs 36.3%). Besides, male students are more likely to report using no social network for job hunting, and female students are more likely to report family members and relatives as their important social networks.

**Table 5.2 Bivariate relationship between university experiences and family annual income level**

University Experiences	Family Annual Income Level				
	Very low	Low	Average or a bit above	High	Very high
<b>Major</b>					
Sciences and Engineering	76.4%	69.2%	67.3%	71.6%	68.0%
Commerce	11.8%	15.6%	19.2%	18.4%	21.3%
Social Sciences and Humanities	11.9%	15.1%	13.5%	10.0%	10.7%
N	1187	2101	890	184	161
	Chi-square = 42.939** G = .091**				
<b>Scholarship</b>					
Yes	65.8%	64.6%	65.2%	60.5%	71.1%
No	34.2%	35.4%	34.8%	39.5%	28.9%
N	1285	2243	947	200	173
	Chi-square = 5.053				
<b>Academic standing</b>					
Top	28.7%	26.9%	23.0%	20.3%	34.3%
Middle	54.0%	56.9%	60.5%	53.8%	44.4%
Bottom	17.3%	16.2%	16.5%	25.9%	21.3%
N	1277	2211	926	197	169
	Chi-square = 33.756** G = .048*				
<b>English proficiency</b>					
Poor	51.3%	42.7%	34.8%	33.5%	33.3%
Fair	27.1%	28.8%	28.6%	21.5%	20.7%
Good	21.6%	28.5%	36.6%	45.0%	46.0%
N	1289	2260	951	200	174
	Chi-square = 126.9** G = 199**				
<b>CET-4</b>					
Yes	83.6%	85.2%	90.3%	88.4%	92.5%
No	16.4%	14.8%	9.7%	11.6%	7.5%
N	1262	2208	932	198	173
	Chi-square = 29.016** G = -.169**				
<b>CET-6</b>					
Yes	47.0%	50.7%	56.3%	57.4%	61.1%
No	53.0%	49.3%	43.7%	42.6%	38.9%
N	1230	2199	931	197	175
	Chi-square = 28.317** G = -.121**				
<b>Dual-degree</b>					
Yes, obtained	5.8%	5.5%	5.5%	7.0%	11.9%
Yes, still studying for it	5.2%	6.2%	4.6%	6.0%	17.0%
No	89.1%	88.3%	89.9%	87.1%	71.0%
N	1299	2266	952	201	176
	Chi-square = 59.203** G = -.078*				

**Certificate of occupational qualification**

Yes	33.5%	31.7%	32.7%	37.5%	34.7%
No	66.5%	68.3%	67.3%	62.5%	65.3%
N	1282	2240	943	200	173

Chi-square = 3.861

**Work experiences**

Yes	54.0%	51.3%	49.8%	40.4%	55.5%
No	46.0%	48.7%	50.2%	59.6%	44.5%
N	1273	2237	948	198	173

Chi-square = 15.100\*\* G = .057\*

**Student cadre**

Yes	43.0%	48.1%	52.7%	43.7%	63.1%
No	57.0%	51.9%	47.3%	56.3%	36.9%
N	1278	2247	939	197	168

Chi-square = 37.820\*\* G = -.114\*\*

**The CPC member**

Yes	33.8%	37.0%	37.7%	32.7%	39.6%
No	66.2%	63.0%	62.3%	67.3%	60.4%
N	1284	2254	957	196	169

Chi-square = 6.789

**Participating social activities**

Few	58.0%	53.2%	47.4%	56.5%	41.6%
Sometimes	37.8%	39.6%	44.7%	36.4%	45.3%
Often	4.2%	7.2%	7.9%	7.1%	13.0%
N	1187	2101	890	184	161

Chi-square = 46.263\*\* G = .118\*\*

**The important network for finding job**

No social network	63.0%	57.0%	52.5%	53.1%	41.7%
Family members	18.8%	22.1%	29.9%	23.4%	33.3%
Friends	11.8%	16.9%	9.2%	15.6%	16.7%
Family members and Friends	6.4%	4.0%	8.4%	7.8%	8.3%
N	330	605	261	64	48

Chi-square = 32.434\*\* G = .105\*\*

\* Significant level &lt; 0.05

\*\* Significant level &lt; 0.01

**Table 5.3 Bivariate relationship between university experiences and parents' education level**

University Experiences	Parents' Education Level			
	Both less than elementary school	One parent with secondary education	Both parents with secondary education	One or both parents with postsecondary education
<b>Major</b>				
Sciences and Engineering	71.3%	70.5%	71.2%	71.9%
Commerce	13.4%	15.4%	16.1%	16.6%
Social Sciences and Humanities	15.3%	14.1%	12.6%	11.5%
N	659	1153	2135	1296
	Chi-square = 9.781			
<b>Scholarship</b>				
Yes	62.6%	64.6%	66.6%	64.9%
No	37.4%	35.4%	33.4%	35.1%
N	645	1143	2137	1278
	Chi-square = 3.949			
<b>Academic standing</b>				
Top	27.0%	28.8%	25.4%	25.6%
Middle	52.5%	54.5%	57.3%	55.8%
Bottom	20.5%	16.7%	17.3%	18.6%
N	629	1130	2101	1250
	Chi-square = 9.969			
<b>English proficiency</b>				
Poor	53.4%	48.9%	41.1%	33.2%
Fair	23.3%	27.0%	30.3%	26.1%
Good	23.3%	24.1%	28.7%	40.8%
N	653	1150	2141	1293
	Chi-square = 142.6**		G = .197**	
<b>CET-4</b>				
Yes	83.7%	85.0%	85.8%	89.5%
No	16.3%	15.0%	14.2%	10.5%
N	619	1124	2113	1264
	Chi-square = 16.428**		G = -.121**	
<b>CET-6</b>				
Yes	44.4%	47.8%	51.9%	57.8%
No	55.6%	52.2%	48.1%	42.2%
N	606	1124	2088	1253
	Chi-square = 38.414**		G = -.134*	
<b>Dual-degree</b>				
Yes, obtained	4.3%	5.8%	5.5%	7.2%
Yes, still studying for it	5.6%	5.0%	6.3%	7.2%
No	90.1%	89.2%	88.2%	85.6%

N	656	1157	2153	1293
	Chi-square = 13.632*		G = -.105**	
Certificate of occupational qualification				
Yes	28.1%	30.5%	33.4%	34.9%
No	71.9%	69.5%	66.6%	65.1%
N	651	1140	2135	1274
	Chi-square = 11.819**		G = -.076**	
Work experiences				
Yes	56.0%	55.1%	48.9%	49.1%
No	44.0%	44.9%	51.1%	50.9%
N	645	1137	2123	1280
	Chi-square = 19.335**		G = .082**	
Student cadre				
Yes	38.8%	47.0%	47.5%	54.1%
No	61.2%	53.0%	52.5%	45.9%
N	645	1143	2122	1277
	Chi-square = 41.888**		G = -.126**	
CPC member				
Yes	34.2%	37.2%	33.3%	40.1%
No	65.8%	62.8%	66.7%	59.9%
N	646	1146	2138	1282
	Chi-square = 17.433**		G = -.043	
Participation in social activities				
Few	60.1%	55.5%	53.3%	47.9%
Sometimes	36.9%	37.2%	40.7%	42.7%
Often	3.1%	7.4%	5.9%	9.4%
N	586	1074	1989	1178
	Chi-square = 45.290**		G = .113**	
networks for finding job				
No social network	62.1%	59.6%	56.0%	51.2%
Family members	19.0%	17.1%	24.5%	29.6%
Friends	14.4%	16.5%	14.7%	10.8%
Family members and Friends	4.6%	6.8%	4.8%	8.3%
N	195	322	564	324
	Chi-square = 25.265**		G = .070*	

\* Significant level < 0.05

\*\* Significant level < 0.01

**Table 5.4 Bivariate relationship between university experiences and father's occupation**

University Experiences	Father's Occupation						
	Cadre	Senior manager/business owner	Self-employed	Professional/technical person	Worker/Staff	Peasant	Unemployed
<b>Major Sciences and Engineering</b>	71.5%	66.4%	65.7%	74.6%	70.1%	72.0%	74.3%
Commerce	14.4%	19.3%	22.5%	14.7%	17.3%	13.2%	16.2%
Social Sciences and Humanities	14.1%	14.3%	11.8%	10.7%	12.5%	14.8%	9.5%
N	382	223	382	693	1443	1784	253
	Chi-square = 38.857**			G = -.022			
<b>Scholarship</b>							
Yes	64.9%	64.5%	61.1%	65.0%	64.6%	67.5%	61.9%
No	35.1%	35.5%	38.9%	35.0%	35.4%	32.5%	38.1%
N	376	220	386	680	1439	1775	252
	Chi-square = 8.392						
<b>Academic standing</b>							
Top	29.8%	33.0%	20.2%	24.9%	24.6%	29.4%	20.8%
Middle	52.8%	57.1%	59.7%	55.7%	59.2%	52.9%	51.4%
Bottom	17.4%	9.9%	20.2%	19.5%	16.2%	17.7%	27.8%
N	373	212	382	663	1415	1749	245
	Chi-square = 55.502**			G = .005			
<b>English proficiency</b>							
Poor	35.8%	24.3%	38.8%	38.1%	39.4%	50.3%	49.8%
Fair	21.7%	26.1%	29.9%	28.0%	32.8%	25.5%	21.7%
Good	42.6%	49.5%	31.2%	33.9%	27.8%	24.2%	28.5%
N	383	222	384	690	1447	1781	253
	Chi-square = 158.4**			G = -.166**			
<b>CET-4</b>							
Yes	88.9%	91.4%	87.9%	84.0%	88.0%	84.9%	84.3%
No	11.1%	8.6%	12.1%	16.0%	12.0%	15.1%	15.7%
N	370	220	381	667	1424	1738	248
	Chi-square = 18.022**			G = .076*			
<b>CET-6</b>							
Yes	58.4%	64.5%	47.4%	53.2%	54.1%	46.6%	51.4%
No	41.6%	35.5%	52.6%	46.8%	45.9%	53.4%	48.6%
N	358	220	378	671	1393	1726	249
	Chi-square = 45.514**			G = .094**			
<b>Dual-degree</b>							
Yes, obtained	9.7%	11.3%	6.5%	4.9%	6.3%	4.3%	5.1%

Yes, still studying for it	7.0%	12.2%	7.8%	6.4%	6.3%	4.9%	3.1%
No	83.3%	76.6%	85.8%	88.7%	87.4%	90.8%	91.7%
N	383	222	386	691	1451	1794	254
	Chi-square = 60.449**			G = .178**			
Certificate of occupational qualification							
Yes	36.6%	37.3%	29.8%	37.1%	31.3%	31.7%	26.8%
No	63.4%	62.7%	70.2%	62.9%	68.7%	68.3%	73.2%
N	374	220	386	676	1436	1778	254
	Chi-square = 18.450**			G = 0.060**			
Work experiences							
Yes	48.5%	49.8%	45.9%	51.0%	48.0%	54.7%	57.5%
No	51.5%	50.2%	54.1%	49.0%	52.0%	45.3%	42.5%
N	379	221	377	688	1433	1759	252
	Chi-square = 23.966**			G = -.080**			
Student cadre							
Yes	59.2%	55.6%	52.5%	45.4%	49.1%	43.4%	50.6%
No	40.8%	44.4%	47.5%	54.6%	50.9%	56.6%	49.4%
N	380	214	379	681	1435	1769	253
	Chi-square = 45.290**			G = .097**			
CPC member							
Yes	42.7%	41.2%	30.3%	37.6%	38.6%	33.0%	32.9%
No	57.3%	58.8%	69.7%	62.4%	61.4%	67.0%	67.1%
N	377	221	383	689	1432	1781	252
	Chi-square = 28.260**			G = 0.068**			
Participation in social activities							
Few	44.3%	42.3%	48.4%	51.0%	52.1%	58.6%	58.4%
Sometimes	43.1%	48.6%	43.9%	41.1%	41.3%	36.0%	37.9%
Often	12.7%	9.1%	7.6%	7.9%	6.6%	5.4%	3.7%
N	332	208	353	630	1338	1659	243
	Chi-square = 64.284**			G = -.139**			
Network for finding jobs							
No social network	58.5%	49.2%	57.3%	46.0%	53.7%	61.6%	65.3%
Family members	24.5%	16.4%	29.1%	32.8%	24.2%	18.0%	25.3%
Friends	9.6%	18.0%	9.1%	16.7%	16.3%	14.9%	2.7%
Family members and Friends	7.4%	16.4%	4.5%	4.6%	5.8%	5.5%	6.7%
N	94	61	110	174	380	495	75
	Chi-square = 49.581**			G = -.089**			

\* Significant level < 0.05    \*\* Significant level < 0.01

In general, we can confirm that students' socioeconomic background characteristics have significant influences on their experiences in university, especially with respect to English skill, pursuit of dual-degree, social positions in university (e.g. student cadre, CPC membership), social networking and work experience.

Firstly, students with relatively advantaged backgrounds are very likely to pursue dual-degree and be good at English. They reported higher level of English proficiency, better chance in obtaining the certificate(s) for English skill. English has been considered as the most required and important skill in China for getting into labour market. The educational gap between rural and urban has been well recognized in China, and the gap in English education is even more significant, as well-trained English teacher can be rarely found in rural area. The results presented here also suggest that the gap of English skill level exists between the rich and the poor families, between different levels of parental education, as well as between different occupations of fathers. Thus, we may conclude that an advantaged family background can substantially benefit students in receiving better and more training in English. In addition, Table 5.2 – 5.5 also show that there is significantly more interest in obtaining dual-degree in university among students from relatively advantaged backgrounds. It might be because that on one hand, dual-degree requires more financial support from family, and on the other hand, students from advantaged backgrounds are more motivated to learn and pursue advantaged academic position in university.

Secondly, regarding work experiences and participation in social activities, it is interesting to find that the students with disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have work experiences, while those with advantaged backgrounds are more likely to participate in social activities. For poor students, doing some part-time work can be very important for supporting



their education and living condition, and for those who have little concern over financial issues, they may tend to gain more social experiences and build social networks through participating in social activities. In addition, the students from relatively advantaged backgrounds are more likely to be student cadre and to join the CPC. “Student cadre” as a title for students is commonly used in schools in China, referring to the student who holds an administrative position in the student body of a department, a college, or university. Student cadre can be appointed by teachers or administrators, or elected students. Holding such a position indicates a higher social status in university. Not only can they access heterogeneous resources available in a larger or smaller range of institutionalized networks in a university, they can also gain experiences to improve their communication, organization, and leadership skills. CPC membership and student cadre status can be overlapped, as student cadres are usually privileged in joining the CPC due to an easy recognition of their merits and abilities through working with students and teachers. The Party membership has been widely considered as beneficial and sometimes even necessary for upward mobility for the political and managerial positions in China, especially in public sectors. Besides, it is not difficult to understand that the students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to report having no important social networks for their job hunting, and relatively advantaged students are more likely to acquire different types of social networks, especially the networks gained through family members.

**Table 5.5 Bivariate relationship between university experiences and residential area before university, and gender**

University Experiences	Residential area before university			
	Urban area	Rural area	Male	Female
<b>Major</b>				
Sciences and Engineering	69.5%	73.1%	77.7%	58.7%
Commerce	17.7%	13.7%	12.2%	22.6%
Social Sciences and Humanities	12.9%	13.2%	10.1%	18.8%
N	2690	2556	3511	1759

	Chi-square = 15.645** G = -.068*		Chi-square = 207.6** G = .382**	
<b>Scholarship</b>				
Yes	64.4%	66.0%	61.8%	71.6%
No	35.6%	34.0%	38.2%	28.4%
	2670	2536	3475	1749
	Chi-square = 1.378		Chi-square = 49.463** G = -.219**	
<b>Academic standing</b>				
Top	24.7%	28.4%	23.8%	32.0%
Middle	57.6%	53.4%	53.6%	59.4%
Bottom	17.7%	18.2%	22.6%	8.6%
N	2612	2501	3430	1701
	Chi-square = 10.834** G = -.047		Chi-square = 158.9** G = -.290**	
<b>English proficiency</b>				
Poor	36.2%	49.2%	44.7%	38.0%
Fair	29.5%	25.6%	27.4%	28.0%
Good	34.3%	25.2%	27.8%	33.9%
	2689	2551	3502	1756
	Chi-square = 94.854** G = -.217**		Chi-square = 26.974** G = .124**	
<b>CET-4</b>				
Yes	86.8%	85.8%	85.3%	88.3%
No	13.2%	14.2%	14.7%	11.7%
	2610	2513	3429	1713
	Chi-square = 1.230		Chi-square = 8.485** G = -.129**	
<b>CET-6</b>				
Yes	54.7%	48.0%	47.5%	59.4%
No	45.3%	52.0%	52.5%	40.6%
N	2590	2481	3423	1666
	Chi-square = 23.074** G = .134**		Chi-square = 63.445** G = -.236**	
<b>Dual-degree</b>				
Yes, obtained	6.9%	4.7%	5.2%	6.9%
Yes, still studying for it	6.7%	5.5%	7.0%	4.5%
No	86.4%	89.9%	87.8%	88.6%
N	2697	2566	3518	1762
	Chi-square = 16.723** G = .165**		Chi-square = 17.965** G = .026	
<b>Certificate of occupational qualification</b>				
Yes	33.7%	31.2%	31.6%	34.1%
No	66.3%	68.8%	68.4%	65.9%
N	2664	2539	3479	1741

	Chi-square = 3.750		Chi-square = 3.312	
<b>Work experiences</b>				
Yes	49.1%	53.4%	47.9%	57.7%
No	50.9%	46.6%	52.1%	42.3%
	2664	2524	3467	1739
	Chi-square = 9.286** G = -.085**		Chi-square = 43.964** G = -.194**	
<b>Student cadre</b>				
Yes	51.1%	44.3%	47.3%	48.9%
No	48.9%	55.7%	52.7%	51.1%
N	2656	2535	3467	1741
	Chi-square = 23.440* G = .134*		Chi-square = 1.155	
<b>CPC member</b>				
Yes	38.7%	32.8%	33.1%	41.3%
No	61.3%	67.2%	66.9%	58.7%
	2671	2544	3463	1764
	Chi-square = 20.172* G = .129*		Chi-square = 34.194** G = -.174**	
<b>Participation in social activities</b>				
Few	50.0%	57.0%	57.0%	46.1%
Sometimes	42.4%	37.2%	36.3%	47.4%
Often	7.6%	5.9%	6.7%	6.5%
	2460	2373	3216	1630
	Chi-square = 25.112** G = -.133**		Chi-square = 58.014** G = .180**	
<b>Network for finding jobs</b>				
No social network	52.7%	60.3%	58.8%	51.3%
Family members	26.4%	20.1%	20.2%	30.2%
Friends	14.0%	14.5%	14.7%	13.2%
Family members and Friends	6.9%	5.2%	6.3%	5.3%
	713	692	980	431
	Chi-square = 11.139* G = -.112*		Chi-square = 16.691** G = .079	

\* Significant level < 0.05

\*\* Significant level < 0.01

### ***5.2.2 Background Characteristics, University Experiences, and Postgraduate Achievement***

In this section of analysis, rather than analyze the total population included in the general survey which consists of students in different years and with different postgraduate plans, I only

focus on the undergraduate students who were in their graduation year<sup>13</sup> (4<sup>th</sup> year) and planned to find a job after graduation with a population of 705. Among this group of students, 72% have found a job and 28% haven't. Table 5.6 presents how background characteristics and university experiences are related to their status of postgraduate employment. It's interesting to find that background characteristics show no significant relationship with students' status of job finding, while almost all the university experience factors have significant impacts on whether or not the student has found job. Combining with the results from previous analysis that most of the background characteristic factors play significant role in students' university experiences, I would like to suggest that rather than having direct impacts on students' postgraduate job hunting experiences, background characteristics may influence their postgraduate employment through university experiences. Table 5.6 also presents an interesting result regarding students' acquisition of social networks and their postgraduate employment status, that the students who reported no social networks have the highest percentage of finding jobs (75%), while the students who reported having both family members and friends as their useful social networks in looking for jobs have the lowest rate of finding jobs (51.9%). Does it mean that social network brings no positive impact on finding jobs? It is very doubtful. One possible explanation might be that students still tended to find jobs through their own efforts in the early stage of job hunting in June, and social networks may not be considered as a resource to rely on until they have to officially leave university by the end of July or in August and desperately need a job.

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<sup>13</sup> This data was collected in June, 2006, so the students who reported as in their fourth year either have graduated or would graduate within a couple of months.

**Table 5.6 Bivariate relationship between postgraduate employment and background characteristics along with university experiences**

Background Characteristics & University Experiences	Have found a job		
	Number	Percentage	Chi-square
<b>Gender</b>			9.085**
Male	541	74.9%	
Female	164	62.8%	
<b>Residential area before university</b>			0.961
Urban area	308	70.5%	
Rural area	393	73.8%	
<b>Family annual income</b>			1.506
Very low	188	71.3%	
low	305	74.1%	
average	117	74.4%	
high	28	71.4%	
very high	16	62.5%	
<b>Father's occupation</b>			4.26
Cadre	38	78.9%	
Manager and Business owner	27	81.5%	
Profession/technical person	80	66.2%	
worker/staff	157	70.1%	
self-employed	72	70.8%	
Peasant	290	73.1%	
Unemployed	26	75.0%	
<b>Parents' education level</b>			4.471
both less than secondary school	98	69.4%	
One parent with secondary education	183	74.9%	
Both parents with secondary education	277	74.7%	
One or both parents with postsecondary education	142	66.2%	
<b>Major</b>			20.474**
Sciences and Engineering	482	76.8%	
Commerce	110	69.1%	
Social Sciences and Humanities	108	55.6%	
<b>Scholarship</b>			18.678**
Yes	387	78.6%	
No	312	63.8%	
<b>Academic standing</b>			12.723**
Top	116	72.4	
Middle	393	76.6	
Bottom	192	62.5	
<b>English proficiency</b>			0.784
Poor	346	70.5%	

Fair	180	72.8%	
Good	177	74.0%	
<b>CET-4</b>			11.482**
Yes	593	75.0%	
No	105	59.0%	
<b>CET-6</b>			0.62
Yes	224	74.6%	
No	470	71.7%	
<b>Certificate of occupational qualification</b>			13.464**
Yes	253	80.2%	
No	446	67.3%	
<b>Work experiences</b>			10.260**
Yes	325	78.2%	
No	363	67.2%	
<b>Student cadre</b>			3.844*
Yes	321	77.0%	
No	364	68.7%	
<b>CPC member</b>			7.154**
Yes	185	80.0%	
No	509	69.7%	
<b>Participating social activities</b>			5.996*
Few	341	67.0%	
Sometimes	278	73.1%	
Often	53	81.1%	
<b>The important network for finding job</b>			7.938*
No social network	329	74.5%	
Family members	133	67.7%	
Friends	102	67.6%	
Family members and Friends	27	51.9%	

\* Significant level < 0.05

\*\* Significant level < 0.01

Table 5.7 presents a logistic regression model which includes all the variables of significance in Table 5.6. The “goodness-of-fit” (-2LL) statistic indicates that this model fits the data adequately, and the significant model chi-square shows that the independent variables in the models do make a difference in predicting the odds of whether or not respondents have found a job (model chi-square). Combining the results shown in both Table 5.6 and 5.7, we gain some conclusions: male students have better chance to find jobs than female students; students

studying sciences and engineering are most likely to find job, although commerce students may have less chance of finding job compared to sciences and engineering students, but they still have better chance than social sciences and humanities students; the students who have ever received scholarship are more likely to get a job; having work experience increases their chances in getting jobs after graduation; and having CPC membership and holding the CET-4 certificate also increase students' opportunities in the job market. In general, we may gain a general idea on what matter in job hunting, that are major, gender, official recognition of academic excellence and English skills, work experience, and CPC membership.

Although family backgrounds show little direct impact on university students' postgraduate achievement in employment, the analysis of the same data done by Li and his colleagues indicates that socioeconomic backgrounds are significantly related to students' plans for postgraduate studies, with those from more educated families and better financial backgrounds more inclined to plan for postgraduate studies (Li, Li & Zong, 2007). In addition, the same study finds that university experiences with respect to academic standing, English proficiency and hours spent in paid employment influence the probability of postgraduate educational planning, that is to say, the students who are more academically qualified and devote less time in working for payment have higher propensity for postgraduate educational aspirations.

**Table 5.7 Logistic regression showing logits and odds of postgraduate employment (have found a job or not) associated with background characteristics and university experiences**

<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b><i>B</i></b>	<b><i>Exp(B)</i></b>
<hr/>		
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	0.797**	2.22
Female ( $\alpha$ )		
<b>Major</b>		
Sciences and Engineering	1.107**	3.026
Commerce	0.672*	1.822
Social Sciences and Humanities ( $\alpha$ )		

<b>Scholarship</b>		
Yes	0.441*	1.554
No ( $\alpha$ )		
<b>Academic standing</b>		
Top	0.006	1.006
Middle	0.360	1.433
Bottom ( $\alpha$ )		
<b>CET-4</b>		
Yes	0.461*	1.586
No ( $\alpha$ )		
<b>Certificate of occupational qualification</b>		
Yes	0.317	1.373
No ( $\alpha$ )		
<b>Work experiences</b>		
Yes	0.420*	1.522
No ( $\alpha$ )		
<b>Student cadre</b>		
Yes	0.199	1.219
No ( $\alpha$ )		
<b>CPC member</b>		
Yes	0.703**	2.02
No ( $\alpha$ )		
<b>Participating social activities</b>		
Few	-0.612	0.542
Sometimes	-0.309	0.734
Often ( $\alpha$ )		
<b>The important network for finding job</b>		
No social network	0.849	2.337
Family members	0.901	2.462
Friends	0.417	1.518
Family members and Friends ( $\alpha$ )		
<b>University Name</b>		
Xi'an Jiaotong University	0.178	1.194
Lanzhou University ( $\alpha$ )		
Number of cases	654	
- 2 Log likelihood	482.9	
Chi square	367.325	
Model chi square	74.06**	

\* Significant level < 0.05 \*\* Significant level < 0.01 ( $\alpha$ ) Reference category



### 5.3 Discussion and Summary

According to Bourdieu, cultural capital can exist in three forms: the embodied state, i.e. in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, such as habitus, aptitudes, tastes, and competencies; the objectified state in the form of cultural goods, i.e. picture, books, or instruments; and the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which can be seen in the case of educational qualification, the academic certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture (Bourdieu, 1986). Based on Bourdieu's concept, some of the independent variables can be defined as representing an embodied state of cultural capital, such as self-perceived English proficiency, inclination to work, and inclination to participate in social activities. Socioeconomic backgrounds have significant impacts on these cultural capitals. Obtaining dual-degree, the CET 4 and/or CET 6 certificates, and scholarship can be considered as the institutionalized forms of cultural capital, as they are officially recognized as the proofs of English skills, educational qualification, and academic outstanding. More importantly, these institutionalized cultural capitals all have direct and positive impacts on students' chances of finding job, but among the embodied forms of cultural capitals, only inclination to work shows a tendency to increase their chance in finding job.

It is interesting to find that socioeconomic backgrounds have no significant impact on students' academic standings or the acquisition of scholarship which is considered as an official recognition of academic outstanding. It might be due to their relatively high academic performance even before they got into university, since obtaining a high score in the NCEE is the primary requirement for them admitted to these two key-point universities. The finding indicates

that once students got into universities, especially key-point universities, their family backgrounds may have little direct interference in their actual academic performances.

Bourdieu (1986) also defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition, or in other words, to membership in a group” (p21). Besides, Bourdieu (1986) also suggests that institutionalized networks can be socially guaranteed by the application of a common name (the name of a family, a class, or a tribe or of a school, a party, etc.). By using Bourdieu’s definition of social capital, I am able to identify CPC membership as a social capital for university students. Researchers studying post-revolutionary Communist regimes have found that education has played an increasingly important role in the attainment of party membership and elite status (Bian, 1994; Lin & Bian, 1991; Szelenyi, 1987), and Bian and his colleagues (2001) in China also noted that although political loyalty is still a persistently important criterion in recruiting Communist party members, China has made historical shifts from recruiting CPC members based on proletariat class origin and political loyalty to level of education. Furthermore, they also found that party membership is positively associated with mobility into positions of political and managerial authority in post-1978 China. These findings may explain why 35.3% of respondents in the general survey and 50% of participants of the interview I conducted have gained CPC membership in university, and 30% of my interviewees reported that they were in the process of applying for CPC membership (Table 4.2), and why holding CPC membership can increase the odds of finding jobs. I also find that having father whose occupation as being cadre or senior manager, or having one or both parent(s) with post-secondary education or to be CPC member are all positively associated with students’ CPC membership. Therefore, it is not difficult to recognize that as a socially and politically

privileged status in China, CPC membership has been largely reproduced across generations within privileged families, and origin of working class has been no more an important criterion in recruiting Communist party member.

According to Bourdieu's categories, CPC membership can be recognized as a highly institutionalized social capital, and in terms of job hunting, networks built on family and friendship are less institutionalized social capital for university students. In China's context, some scholars emphasize a relational Chinese culture of *Guanxi*, which refer to interpersonal connections of sentiments of obligations that dictate social interaction and facilitate favor exchange in Chinese society (Bian, 1997; Fei, 1992). In post-1978 China, *Guanxi* networks have been found to expand Chinese people's job and career opportunities (Bian, 1997; Bian & Zhang, 2001). In contrast to western societies where weak tie of low intimacy are more frequently used to learn information (Granovetter, 1995; Lin, 1999), strong ties in China are used to secure influence over the recruitment process (Bian, 2002). Chinese people predominantly use relatives and intimate friends as *Guanxi* networks, but sometimes, if they only have acquaintances, connections can be made through intermediaries who are strongly tied to both sides, in general, *Guanxi* networks of varying strengths can be used to provide both influence and information (Bian, 1997, 2002). Therefore, in China, *Guanxi* networks can be vital social capital to facilitate Chinese university student's postgraduate job search process. The analysis on general survey data indicates that advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are positively associated with the possession of family and friend networks which are important in job searching process in general, but these networks haven't shown a significant or consistent trend in affecting the employment results. Thus, interview data is needed to provide in-depth information to understand the role these networks playing in student's postgraduate employment and achievement. Besides, student

cadre is one of the most important social positions and experiences a student may obtain in university in addition of academic position. However, it is difficult to fully recognize the importance of student cadre position in students' postgraduate achievements merely through quantitative analysis. Therefore, again, I need to seek further information and better understanding through qualitative analysis of interview data, in order to explore whether or not and to what extent the position of student cadre is attached with certain types of capitals which can enable or/and constrain students in practicing their strategic agency.

In general, based on quantitative analysis, I find that the socioeconomic background shows strong associations with students' university experiences and positions but no significant or direct impact on students' postgraduate employment. Also, the institutionalized form of cultural capital (e.g. the number of academic degrees, major, and the certificate in English skills) and the institutionalized social capital, such as CPC membership, have significant and direct impact on students' postgraduate employment. However, the embodied cultural capitals (e.g. self-reported English proficiency, inclination to participating in social activities) only show significant associations with students' postgraduate employment in bivariate analysis but not in multivariate regression analysis. The possession of work experiences may show students' inclination of working for pay, but it can also be recognized as a competence of new graduate students in job market, same as the other institutionalized cultural and social capitals, they are all positively and directly associated with students' postgraduate employment status. Combining all the findings above, it seems that the background characteristics can be influential over students' postgraduate employment through different types of capital acquired and possessed by students, but this indirect connection is still subject to further explanations through qualitative analysis. Additionally, because the general survey data has no relevant survey question dealing

with the achievement of other postgraduate aspirations, such as pursuing graduate study or studying abroad, it has limitation in examining the actual postgraduate achievements. To overcome the limitations in quantitative analysis and gain more in-depth understanding of how students' strategic agency is constrained and enabled by social institutions and contexts, Chapter 6 and 7 will provide qualitative analysis.

## **Chapter VI**

### **Qualitative Analysis on Interactions with Social and Institutional Contexts**

In Chapter 2, I discussed an examination-based meritocracy as a dominant social ideology in traditional China. The education and examinations are structured and institutionalized by the state authority, to select intellectual elites, provide a narrow outlet for social mobility, and ensure social stability under the control of the central government. After the founding of the PRC, the Communist Party under Mao restructured China's society based on socialist system which emphasizes the ruling status of working class. With respect to education, by launching dramatic educational reforms and mobilizing social movement named as Cultural Revolution, Mao attempted to replace examination-based meritocracy with an idea of emphasizing manual and practical skills and knowledge. The dramatic and compulsory reform only put the examination-based meritocracy in suspension for less than ten years, and it was immediately restored along with the appeasement of the revolutionary storm. Actually, the more recent educational reform and social change in post-1978 China may generate more profound and long-standing impact over social stratification and social mobility in China.

Putting aside the historical interruptions including wars and social movements such as the Cultural Revolution, education, or to be more specific, examination has been one of the most important mechanisms for Chinese people to maintain or obtain more privileged socioeconomic status for more than thousand years. Notwithstanding the potential and underlying inequalities and controversies of examinations especially the NCEE in modern China (Zheng, 2008), Chinese in general perceive a sequence of education-examination-employment as a common sense to ensure their original privileged status or achieving a higher status than what they originally have. The graduate job assignment system adopted after the founding of the PRC established a direct

and restrictive link between education and labour market. The transition paths were taken to achieve specific career goals. Once set on a path, change can hardly be made. The nine year compulsory education system, including six year of primary education and three year of junior high or technical school, makes sure that young people would receive enough education to master basic knowledge and skills to work in certain labour market sector. Beyond nine year of compulsory education, young people would split up into three groups based on academic performances, including entering labour market, going to specialized or vocational high schools, or moving up to senior high school, and it is extremely difficult for the students who has already chosen one of the other two paths to be back to senior high school. Senior high school education is mainly for students to prepare for the NCEE and participate in postsecondary education. With respect to postgraduate transitions, before it has been gradually repealed at different level of education since early 1990s, the graduate job assignment system guaranteed new graduates to be assigned a job through governmental arrangements according to the education they received, and postsecondary graduates would be assigned administrative, managerial, or skilled jobs. Till now, only some specialized high schools or certain special postsecondary programs providing vocational education still implement certain level of graduate job assignment policy, but graduating from postsecondary institution is neither beneficial from nor restricted by this job assignment system anymore.

### **6.1 University as the Pathway to Better Life: A Common Sense Lifeworld**

Through analyzing interview data, I immediately recognize a dominant common sense about university education mentioned by almost all the participants. Generally speaking, that is university education is the pathway to a better life in the future. Their narratives reveal that even if they haven't had clear a mind of why they attended university, a variety of external social

forces have driven them to that direction. One of the primary driving forces is from parents. Some participants point out that the main driving force for them to go to university is parents' request or expectation, and they have never questioned it, even if they lack specific motivation to receive university education. For example, when I asked why they decided to attend university, here are some typical responses:

Abby: Well...I think I just naturally decided it, I had little idea about university, no concrete idea about it. I just want to study hard in high school, and get into a good university, and then get a good job, that's it! My parents always said so, so I didn't think much at that time.

Nancy: Because that's our Chinese tradition, we all think we should go to university, and then you can get a better job. My parents...and other people all think this way.

Rebecca: since really young, I just felt that from elementary school, junior high, senior high, to university, it's like a must-taken path, no other choice. No matter what, people around me, parents, relatives, they all approve this path, so you must approve it as well. Actually, I would like to take this path, it is a natural decision.

Nathan: I didn't think so much, mainly for the sake of my parents, because it is really not easy for them to support my education, I just feel I must study harder. To myself, it doesn't matter if I go to university or not. I don't have a big goal.

Daniel: Personally, I wanted to attend university since I was very young, not because of interest, just felt I should do it. Parents have always been supportive in our (Daniel and his brother) education, even when our family was facing financial difficulties...my father is an elementary school teacher...I still really want to meet parents' expectation.

Some participants also mentioned that their parents explicitly or implicitly expressed their expectation on them regarding higher education. Based on their life experiences, lack of education has become the biggest barrier in pursuing better life, so they have strong anxiety that their children wouldn't follow their path, and some of them tend to invest all their resources to prevent their children from having the same lifestyle as they do.

Sara: My parents considered attending university as necessary...we lived in rural area, some of my friends only finished elementary school, but in my family, my father have been really supportive for my education, because he couldn't get enough education when he was young.

Rebecca: My parents devoted so much to my education, as well as to my brother's and sister's.



They'd rather live the most simple and poor life to support us in higher education.

Julie: My parents are just like many other parents in China, hoping their kids wouldn't be like them, wouldn't have to eat so much bitterness and bear so many hardships, be a literate person. Something like that. My mother always says, their life got a beating due to having little education.

Ian: In China, all the parents want their kids to be very successful. My parents are like that too. Although they didn't say much about it, I could feel they had very high expectation on me, and I know they were not very satisfied by me getting into this university.

Besides emphasizing the influence of parents, some participants also make it clear that they are willing to meet parents' expectation and have clearly recognized university education as a necessary pathway to better life.

YL: Why did you decide to attend university?

Cindy: Um...I saw my parents worked really hard, and found stable job in a county, found a way out from the mountain area. If I didn't study hard, I must stay in the mountain area, the condition there is tough. I think attending university is the necessary step for me to live a happy life in future. (laugh)...My father asked me to have a life goal since I was very young. He also said, knowledge is very important, without knowledge, you would be so limited in doing things. I can still remember that, he sent me to school when I was young, on our way, we could see some people selling food on the street, you could tell them living a very hard life, worked so hard, but couldn't make much money. So my father told me that you needed to study hard, be away from this place, go to university, and have a much better life than these people.

YL: why did you decide to attend university?

Marie: I believe people must go to university, because you are from rural area, you may have other options, say, to be a peasant worker, but that is extremely hard work...or, you can stay in your village, a small place, receiving no influence from the outside world, that might be fine, but I don't want to be like that. My family takes children's education as the priority, so they have been very supportive. My older sisters and younger brother all got into university.

A small number of students have ever questioned and challenged the widely accepted common sense reality, but they eventually accepted it due to the pressure from parents. For example, Sam's father was a coal mine worker, and retired due to work injury, his mother was a peasant who strongly pushed her kids to go to university.

YL: Why did you decide to attend university?

Sam: Um...actually, I didn't understand why at first, perhaps it is family factor, it's my mother asking me to go to school, now I feel this is reasonable, but before taking the NCEE, I still didn't understand why, even though my parents always said this was good for my future. I had little intention to attend university. In my family, only one of my sisters didn't go to university (Sam has 5 older sisters and 1 older brother).

YL: Do you think why your parents want you have university education so much?

Sam: Their point is, for the sake of our future life.

YL: What did you want to do if not going to university?

Sam: I just had no interest in school at that time. One of my friends from elementary school egged me on to work and make money. I tended to listen to him at that time, so I didn't want to continue studying anymore. I didn't know the outside world very well. My mother told me many examples, proving me how difficult it can be to work as a peasant worker. I just followed a sudden impulse at first, then had been hesitate for a long time, I continued my school eventually.

YL: why did you say that you understand it more now?

Sam: I have seen more and heard more...like my friends' experiences...my friends, we went to same elementary school together, they felt quite regret when they saw me now, they were regret for not continuing school...If it wasn't my mother, I wouldn't go to university. I guess, my mother just hoped that we wouldn't be like my parents, suffering from the difficult life, she thinks that we would have better life, if we have more knowledge.

Besides parental influences, social pressure from larger society or peer pressure would strengthen someone's intention to attend university as well.

YL: why did you decide to attend university?

Hanna: I think it can be considered as a trend, young generation all want to attend university.

Jack: it might be because that of my father and his nine brothers, six went to university, and my cousin studied abroad, another cousin got into Peking University, so I felt that if I didn't attend university, that would be so embarrassing.

Ian: I think...because of the current social environment in China, attending university becomes the only outlet for the students with disadvantaged family background, just like me.

Daniel: it seems...it seems like everyone wants to get into university. This is a trend. It just depends on whether you are able to attend the university and what kind of university you can get in. I think if you couldn't get into university, it is either because poor family background, or your grade is not high enough.

Large majority of the participants attended university right after graduating from senior high school. They might have ever met difficulties during the transition from high school to university, but they still get into university without any substantial interruption. Two students, Paul and John, attended university after suspending their education for a period of time. They were so insistent to attend university primarily because, on one hand, there had been a connection between university education and better life in their mind through high school teachers' guidance and peer influences; on the other hand, the actual experiences of living in poverty push them to look for a pathway to a better life, and they noticed that university education might be the only way for them.

Due to lack of parents' support, Paul gave up pursuing university education after graduated from junior high school.

YL: why did you decide to attend university?

Paul: Actually...it's been difficult for me to go to university. At first, my parents didn't support me to attend university, so I got into a specialized high school, and started working for one year after graduated, then took the NCEE twice, and finally got into university...My parents were not very supportive, so my path is quite different than most university students.

YL: Why did you want to go to university after working for one year?

Paul: the job is not very good.

YL: What job was it?

Paul: teacher.

YL: Was it bad?

Paul: That's kind of teacher receiving no salary from government...I was working in a village school, just paid 200 yuan per month, even less than what a beggar can get. Then I quitted this job, started to prepare for the NCEE. I didn't get into the university I wanted in the first year, so I got into university the next year. My parents were really not supportive when I took my second NCEE. They thought I should take the first offer, but that's a normal university, not the type of university I want to get in.

YL: Have you ever thought about going to university after finish junior high school?

Paul: Yes, I thought about getting into senior high school, because my teacher kept telling us that you should go to university, and if you want to, you need to go to senior high school, but my parents were not supportive, they wanted me to get a job as soon as possible, so I went to a normal school. I thought I could be a teacher with fair income after graduate from there, but my income was too low.

John had to suspend his education due to lack of financial support.

YL: why did you decide to attend university?

John: Actually I didn't at first. I know I should go to university, many of my classmates went to university. When I was in senior high school, the government had very few policies [on financing individual education], so I had to consider financial issues...I graduated from senior high in 2000, and didn't continue, but went to city as a peasant worker for two years. At that time, there was no student loan or student subsidy in most of the universities, but now there are many funding opportunities, especially if you get into a good university. After working for couple of years, I felt I should go to university and change my lifestyle, there is no future for a peasant worker, so I took the NCEE, got into university.

Both Paul and John worked before getting into university. Financial barrier is the major reason preventing them from continuing education after they finished their postsecondary education. Rather than support his education, Paul's parents expected him find a stable job and make fair money as soon as possible, however, the vocational school diploma didn't provide him the job as he expected. As being told by his teacher that university is an education people should get for better future, and experiencing poverty and hardships due to lack of higher educational qualification, Paul eventually decided to pursue his ideal job through university education, even had to confront opposition from family. John has the similar life experience. To improve their quality of life becomes a primary motive to attend university.

It's not easy to summarize a definitive conception of "better life" from the interview data, which can be viewed as a "cultural goal" in terms of Merton's adaptation model. But based on participants' narratives, for the majority of my interviewees who come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, I can tell that a rough idea of better life they perceived refers to a

better quality of life, mainly in terms of economic situation. Many of them might think of social status as well. For example, peasants in rural area are generally considered as low socioeconomic status in China, so all my respondents with peasant family background have the intention to cast off this peasant identity through university education. For the participants who came from relatively advantaged family backgrounds, maintaining or improving their advantages in socioeconomic situation is their primary goal.

## **6.2 Transition from High School to University: Institutional Restrictions over Flexibility**

In addition to the social contexts including a common sense reality in larger society as well as the influence from family members and school teachers, the institutional contexts also have tremendous impacts on young people's decisions in the transition process from high school to university.

Bourdieu (1991) says that one of the key properties of fields is their degree of institutionalization. He also talks about the degree of codification to express this feature. He defines codification as “an operation of symbolic ordering” which removes ambiguity, normalizes activity and “go hand in glove with discipline” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 80). It is “an operation which makes things official and legal” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 80). Codification ensures calculability and predictability over and above individual variations and temporal fluctuations (Bourdieu, 1990, p.83). Thus, policy can be considered as both the means and manifestation of this codification. The field of education in China shows high degree of institutionalization through its codification. By focusing on student participants' experiences in transitioning from high school to university, I have already found that their decision making process has been predominantly structured by the rules and regulations. Some major effects of codification in the

field of education can be identified in this study: rationalizing and constructing hierarchies among schools and students; establishing normative standards and identifying the most valued resources to define actor's position; drawing clear and strict boundaries between different positions to prevent active mobility in the field.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the higher education in China is a highly stratified system. At each level of education from primary school to university, the officially recognized key-point schools would receive substantial supports including funding and other resources from the level of government which ratifies this "key-point" title to them. In general, there are four levels of postsecondary institutions, which are, ranked from the highest to the lowest, the most prestigious universities listed in "211 Project" and/or "985 Project", key-point universities, non-key-point universities, and colleges. The ranking of a public higher educational institution determines the amount of financial support, the quality of teaching and facilities, as well as its reputation. Thus, university's position in this institutional hierarchy becomes the top consideration among high school graduates when applying for universities. Many of the participants mentioned that they chose university over major, that is to say, based on their NCEE grade, they may be willing to get into a key-point university but study a major they are not interested in, as they have to decide their major when applying for universities. Thus, rather than take personal interest and ability as the primary factor in choosing major, the prestige and ranking of university becomes the top consideration for high school graduates.

YL: Why did you apply for Lanzhou University?

Kara: The main idea is to get into a key-point university. I actually wanted to go to Beijing, Shanghai, didn't want to be here. I wanted to go far away from my hometown and experienced different things. But, my father said, rather than getting into some average university in Beijing, you'd better go to a university like Lanzhou University, that is listed in both 211 and 985 projects...I didn't feel like to come here at first, but now I really appreciate my father's advice.

YL: Why did you choose sociology as your major?

Jason: I just focused on the university at that time. Xi'an Jiaotong University only offered two disciplines in my hometown, sociology and Chinese language and literature. I thought it might be more difficult to get a job with a degree of Chinese language and literature, so I chose sociology.

YL: Why did you choose sociology as your major?

Jason: Actually...I had no idea about what sociology is when just entered university. I just want a degree from a good university. I pay more attention to the university. I was originally interested in business and management. You know, many people are doing business.

YL: Why did you choose Chinese language and literature as your major?

Rebecca: Firstly, as my father suggested, Lanzhou University is a very good university in the Northwest China, so I decided to apply for Lanzhou University. It provided quite a few majors. I was choosing among law, Journalism, English and Chinese literatures. I know that English and Journalism are both very competitive majors, and we can apply for three majors, right? I applied Chinese language and literature as my first choice of major, because I am really interested in Chinese literature in high school, and English was my second choice. I eventually get into the Department of Chinese language and literature.

Students' decision making process over application for universities are highly constrained and structured by the centralized university recruitment system in China. Although there have been some changes in this system<sup>14</sup> since 2008, for large majority of high school graduates, the NCEE is still the only mechanism for access to university education, and the application process is standardized as well. Albeit some minor changes in recent years, the primary procedure are still as following: taking the NCEE, assessing your final grade and/or position among all the exam participants, filling up application form either before or after the grades come out that varies between different provinces. The number of institutions and majors to be applied for is highly limited. Firstly, in their second year of senior high school, large majority of students in

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<sup>14</sup> For example, after entitling two prestigious universities (Peking University and Tsinghua University) with the right of holding independent recruitment exam in 2008, the center government allows other 7 key-point universities obtain this right in 2011. These exams are viewed as very different from the standardized National College Entrance Exam (NCEE), because it requires personal statement from students and tests their over-all abilities. This change aims to provide one more vehicle for high students to access to prestigious universities, but it doesn't mean to abolish the NCEE.

China have to choose an academic orientation<sup>15</sup>, between natural sciences<sup>16</sup> and humanities/social sciences<sup>17</sup>. Thus, the majors they can apply for are restricted within either natural sciences or social sciences/humanities. Secondly, all the postsecondary institutions are stratified into different levels, from highest to the lowest level with labels from A to E, including key-point public university, non-key-point public university, private university, public college, and private college. Students are only allowed to apply for a small number of institutions (3 or 4) in each level, and limited number of majors (3 or 4) in each institution, and the first choice is always the most important one, as their first choice of institution would receive their grade report first and make decision on their enrollment based on the rank of the grades of all the students whoever make this institution as the first choice on their application. If the student failed to meet its cut-off line, her/his grade report will go to the second choice, however, if the second choice of institution has recruited the number of students they need, this student would have little chance to get into his/her second choice of institution regardless of his/her actual grade, eventually, this student may end up getting into an institution at lower level than what his/her grade deserves. Thirdly, in regard to the application of major, students can only choose their major based on the academic orientation they chose in high school, and they have an option to choose whether or not to accept the major assigned by the institution they apply for in the condition that they failed to be admitted by any of the departments they choose, which means if one is not able to get into the major they apply for in this institution, the institution can assign him/her another major in

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<sup>15</sup> There have been debates over the policy of dividing high school students up in terms of two fundamental subjects, natural sciences and social sciences/humanities. It has undergone a few reforms in recent, and varies by provinces and year, so it was abolished for some years in some provinces, but maintained or restored in other years and other provinces. When I was conducting my research in 2009, all my participants still needed to choose one academic orientation in senior high school.

<sup>16</sup> The students, who choose orientation of natural sciences in senior high school, are required to study six subjects, including Chinese Literature, English, Math, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology.

<sup>17</sup> The students, who choose orientation of social sciences and humanities in senior high school, are required to study six subjects, including Chinese Literature, English, Math, Political Studies, History, and Geography.



institution's convenience, so the student can either accept it in order to get into this institution or reject it but take the risk of falling into the lower level of institution.

Many participants provided their account of experiencing and dealing with these restrictions in application process.

YL: Why did you choose sociology as your major?

Paul: I chose the university first. I originally wanted to study economics or finance, but the University only recruited students for two disciplines, law and sociology...I don't know whom to ask, my parents know nothing about university, so I asked my teacher...At that time, law is a very popular specialty. Most of the universities have law school or department, and many students wanted to take law as their major, it would be very competitive, so my teacher said, the competition for employment would be very intense when I finish university, as there will be too many law students, so I chose sociology as my first choice, and got in...but now, I feel they are about the same in terms of getting job.

YL: Why did you choose to study philosophy?

Jerry: I didn't do well in my exam, but I didn't really have to apply for philosophy as my first choice of major. I took advice from my high school teachers. They said, if you study management and business, almost all universities in China have this major, too competitive, but if you study philosophy, even though it's not very popular, you can still be a university teacher in the future, that's good too. Actually, I didn't know what I wanted to do, if choosing based on my own priority, I would put management and business as the first, Chinese literature as the second, philosophy as the last one. I find myself still like literatures, but philosophy gives me more profound thoughts. There was still my own decision (in choosing major), but mainly teachers' advice...now...I have to say, philosophy influences me too much, I don't know if I can get away from it, face the material world and try to make more money like others do. Not sure if it's a good thing or bad thing.

YL: why did you study law as your major?

Daniel: I didn't apply for law as my first major, I was assigned to this major...that's a long story. I actually like Chinese literature and history. I apply for History Department at Peking University. Now thinking back, I felt I was reckless, too bold. (In making this decision,) personal interest is the top reason, and vanity also plays a role, but I failed.

YL: Then, how come did you end up in Xi'an Jiaotong University?

Daniel: It's a coincident. I thought I would be admitted by a lower level of university, didn't expect Xi'an Jiaotong University would give me offer. It was my third choice of A level university, I put it on my application just because a vice president from Xi'an Jiaotong University came to my school and gave a speech. I was lucky, otherwise, I would get into a B level university...

YL: Why did you study law as your major?

Daniel: Oh, that was assigned by university.

YL: What's your major?

Sara: Japanese language and literature.

YL: Why did you choose this major?

Sara: I was assigned to this major. My first choice is business and management, I felt I could be a business woman, but contrary to my will, my grade was not high enough to get in, so I was assigned to Japanese language and literature department.

YL: Why did you apply for the department of Chinese language and literature?

Julie: I have always been interested in language. My English was pretty good, so I applied the English Department as my first choice, the second one is Chinese language and literature, and I only got into the second one. Right after I entered the university, I really wanted to transfer to the English Department, and even submitted my transferring application, but I gave it up, it's really difficult. After studying Chinese literature for a while, I felt I like it now, so I just settled.

YL: What's your major?

Ada: Chinese language and literature.

YL: why did you choose this major?

Ada: that's about the limitation in choosing major...you don't have many choices if you decided to be a social sciences/humanities oriented student in senior high school.

YL: Then, why did you choose social sciences and humanity?

Ada: There is something...you wouldn't know if your choice is right or wrong before you experience it. You have to experience it in person, then you will know.

Peter: about my major, I have been feeling lost for a long time. It is very difficult to change major in China. I know nothing about sociology when I applied for it. I just wanted to get into this university...I don't feel like studying sociology. If I could choose again, I would definitely choose something I am interested in.

Through analyzing a few students' narratives above, I gain more concrete idea of how university recruitment system restricting their choices during postsecondary transition. Firstly, students' majors are very likely to be determined before they are well informed about certain discipline and university. For example, Ada's ambiguous account of her reason to choose certain

major and Peter's confusion of his major show a severe lack of information when they decided which discipline they were going to study. The students who couldn't gain more specific information and guidance from their parents or other family members are in disadvantaged position to make effective decision on which university and major they want to apply for. Both Paul and Jerry mentioned their difficulties in choosing major due to limitation of options and lack of information, and they both appeared not fully satisfied with the advice they gained for making decision. Moreover, university application is one of the most important decisions in these students' life courses, as it would have tremendous impacts on their postgraduate transitions, especially their occupations in future. For example, Jerry's way of thinking has been profoundly influenced by what he studies, that is philosophy. Also, the opportunities of changing major and/or university are highly constrained in university educational system<sup>18</sup>, so Julie had to give up her plan of changing major. Thus, there is very little room for university students to practice agency in changing major and/or university once it was decided either by the student or the university.

In general, students' options during their postsecondary transition have been highly constrained by many institutional factors, starting from division between humanities/social sciences and natural sciences in senior high school, to limiting number of universities and majors to apply for; from taking the NCEE grade as the single criterion for recruitment, to setting up nationwide standardized procedures in university recruitment and student application, additionally, there are restrictions preventing students from transferring within and between universities. In the postsecondary transition process, the academic performance, to be more

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<sup>18</sup> Since 2002, some university started to allow students, after one year of study in their major, get a chance to transfer to a different major, based on their grades of departmental assessment test, interview scores, and existing GPA. Transfers may only occur at the second semester of the first year. Students only have one opportunity to re-decide their major. Under this policy, only 5-10 per cent of students may be permitted to re-choose their major after entering university, which was not possible before 2002.

specific, the NCEE grade is almost the only valued capital for students in competing for higher positions in the field of higher education, and all the unified and standardized rules are used to constrain the possibility of valuing other types of resource and maintain the structure of this field by ensuring players stay in the same positions once they enter. With very little flexibility, the secondary education and university recruitment system in China impose tremendous institutional restrictions on young students' agency in their postsecondary transition as well as university academic experiences, and only enable their ability to take standardized examinations.

### **6.3 Transition from University to Labour market: Institutional flexibility over Restriction**

#### ***6.3.1 Uncertainties in Postgraduate Goals and Achievements***

I interviewed the participants about one or two months before their graduation. Except for 18 participants would enter graduate programs in September, 22 of them were either looking for job or have found job. When the participants were asked if they felt it was difficult to find a job, with no exception, all of them gave a positive response. If we consider postsecondary transition for these students is a challenging process with full of institutional restrictions, the postgraduate transition may be more challenging in terms of uncertainties and confusions, and it is a transition process from the field of education to the field of labour market. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, almost all the participants had a goal to have a good quality of life or good future when they decided to go to university. Thus, in experiencing postgraduate transition, they started to develop more concrete idea about their goal as well as the definition of good life or good future. For the students who were new to the labour market, obtaining a good job or a higher position in the field of labour market becomes their goal.

YL: Are you optimistic about your job hunting?

James: It's not a problem to find a job, but what kind of job is the problem. I used to think I can

find a good job, but now, I feel I can only find an average job.

YL: What do you mean by “good job” and “average job”.

James: For example, get a job in a medium-size company, monthly salary is around 3000 yuan, if they offer insurance package<sup>19</sup>, that would be good, if no insurance, it’s fine too. Now I feel it’s difficult to get a job in a medium-size company now, so I may have to work in a small company, perhaps 1500 yuan a month. I won’t ask for too much...but I’m still waiting for the result of the Public Service Examination<sup>20</sup>, then I will see if I can get a job in government agency, that would be better.

YL: How much can you make as a public service staff?

James: Not much, around 1500 or 2000 perhaps...but it’s stable.

YL: Why do you think it’s been difficult for university graduates to find a job?

Lydia: I think there are two types of finding a job here. One is to find whatever job to feed yourself, this is not difficult; but you complete university, get a degree, you want to find a job suitable for you, that’s very difficult...if you want a job to make extra money for supporting parents, brother and sister, that’s would be really difficult. I’m not saying the labour market cannot absorb labours, you can see lots of job postings to hire waitress, cleaners, and so on...Do you want that kind of jobs? No, you don’t. Your parents wouldn’t be happy...there’s also social pressure, people will talk. But it’s really hard to find a suitable job which you can build career on.

YL: Do you think why it’s been so difficult for new university graduates to find a job?

Jason: It’s been really difficult, especially this year, financial crisis, but this is not the main reason. I think university students in general make their expectation too high. There are many jobs out there, but they might think they have got so many years of education...Not sure if you notice this or not, the employment rate of average universities or college is not bad, some are even better than that of key-point universities. The students from good universities thought they should get

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<sup>19</sup> According to the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Employment Contracts implemented in 2008, the employer must provide social insurance package for employees, including endowment insurance, medical insurance, unemployment insurance, maternity insurance, and employment injury insurance. The housing accumulation fund is not required by the law, but still widely provided by the employers. Among the five types of social insurance, employer and employee share payment of the premiums of endowment insurance, medical insurance and unemployment insurance, and employer is solely responsible for the premiums of employment injury insurance and maternity insurance. However, it’s been found by national survey that majority of new graduates have little idea about or pay little attention to the social insurance package. Since it’s been already difficult to find a job, they focus more on the salary. In addition, despite of the regulations in law, whether or not providing the social insurance package still depends on the employer. Generally speaking, government agencies, public owned enterprises and institutions usually provide the insurance package, but private enterprises do not always do, but the salary might be higher. More information can be found at (Chinese website)

[http://www.edu.cn/zong\\_he\\_news\\_465/20110119/t20110119\\_571878.shtml](http://www.edu.cn/zong_he_news_465/20110119/t20110119_571878.shtml)

<sup>20</sup> A modern examination system in China is used for selecting public service staff. It is a nationwide exam and held annually. Public service staff has been currently considered as one of the less-stressed and secured jobs in China. Some argue that the modern national public service exam is indirectly evolved from the imperial examination in ancient China.

higher salary, say four thousands yuan per month, but they (the employer) only want to pay two thousands, so they (students) wouldn't take the offer. Also, we don't have Graduate Assignment Policy anymore.

James' account can actually represent majority of the participants' understanding of good job. A good job can be defined by salary and other benefits such as insurances, as well as prestige. James and Lydia didn't explicitly mentioned the prestige of occupation in their narratives, but James was willing to become a junior level of civil servant rather than an employee working in a small company earning similar or even slightly higher income. Lydia also expressed her concern over whether the job can be approved by parents and society as matching her status of university graduate. Jason recognized the significant gap between university students' expectation of employment and the reality in labour market. Through experiencing job search process and/or receiving secondary information about such experiences, all the participants recognized the tremendous difficulties and barriers to find an ideal job as a new university graduate, and that is contradictory to the common sense they've accepted for years.

According to their accounts, most participants have gained certain level of understanding of the reasons behind the difficulties in job search, such as the inflation of university credential and the economic downturn started from 2008. Nevertheless, many of them also put more emphasis on individual factors, since they considered those as the factors which they can control, and tended to individualize the difficulties and problems they had as well as the reasons behind them. Although many participants provided their understanding of social factors at the beginning of their responses, ultimately they attributed the difficult situations of finding an ideal job to individual factors, because they saw some other students found jobs. Also, they either tended to rationalize their constrained agency by accepting the existing social structures or felt trapped in

an anomic situation of lacking a clear goal.

YL: Do you think why it's been difficult for students to find a job?

Hanna: I think it's been difficult for a long time, just this year, the financial crisis makes it worse...I feel I couldn't define my position clearly...I don't know what to do after graduate, so just like that, I print out my resume and submit it to different companies, but I still don't know what kind of job suits me. I don't have clear goal...if you don't have clear goal, then you won't know what kind of occupation suits you, and you couldn't cultivate abilities relevant to your goal. I think it is still about individual ability.

Rebecca: it's because, on one hand, expansion of higher education increase the enrollment of university students. ...[and] a decline in overall quality of university students, but employment opportunities didn't keep on the pace of increase of university graduates, so employment becomes difficult for university students. On the other hand...it's due to, for example, the specialty offered by university. When one specialty starts growing, it seems there is great demand of talents from that specialty, but four years later, economic and social situation has changed, and the labour market doesn't need this many of talents from that specialty, then the imbalance between supply and demand occurs. However, I think most important reason must be from individual, you have to see if you are competent enough. Why others get hired, not you, it might be because you lack of comprehensive ability. Many people blame government, or blame society, but never try to find the reasons on their own. Since the situation has been like this now, you cannot change anything, so just try to improve yourself.

YL: how do you think about the employment policy for new graduates?

Emma: ...I know there are external reasons, but you will never find a solution if you only focus on those reasons, you have to your own internal reasons, then you can walk ahead. Searching for external reasons is just a way to comfort myself. Eventually, I know that's not others' problem, that's my problem.

Mark: If you cannot find a job, it's mainly your own problem, you cannot blame others...This world is very realistic. The employer values abilities more, although university degree is important, you still need to have genuine and practical abilities. You can only impress those important people with your abilities.

Jack: I think the financial crisis might be one reason, but I don't think that's the main reason. ...For example, in my department, Chinese language and literature, we supposed to know how to write note, letter and other types of documents in correct format, since we are going to work as secretary or teacher, but many of my classmates don't know how to write it correctly. Some of them spend too much time on video game and Internet chatting. They wasted most of their time in university and only started to worry about their future in the fourth year.

### ***6.3.2 Disjunctions between University Education and Labour Market***

In addition to the social contexts and individual factors in job searching process, the participants also mentioned the structural disjunctions between university education and labour market, in terms of knowledge and structure.

YL: Do you think why it's been difficult for new graduates to find a job?

Kevin: ...What employers need doesn't match what the higher education can provide. Most employers want people who have specific skills...The industrial structure in our country is still mainly export-oriented manufacturing industries and labour-intensive industries. They don't need a large number of university graduates who only have general knowledge and theories, but because of expansion of higher education, universities produced so many graduates every year. Like this year, we have more than 6 million new graduates from universities.

YL: How do you think about university education?

Jennifer: I think I didn't learn much useful things through it...mostly theory, endless theory...sometimes, I feel I lack ability to see through the nature of issues, my thoughts are not profound and insightful enough. I don't know what I am learning now, I don't know what I can do in the future.

YL: Do you think why it's been so difficult for new graduates to find a job?

Jennifer: Firstly, it is about educational institution. Those students graduating from vocational school know how to apply their skills into actual work, but university only teaches you theories, you need practical experience when getting into labour market, but what you've have learnt is not useful for your work. Employers don't want you... also, if one program gets popular, all the universities will offer this program without considering the quality, and students will rush into this program. We don't have job assignment policy anymore. After they graduate, there will be more supply than demand in labour market, so only elite students can find job, but they are not elite, just average ones.

YL: How do you think about university education?

James: My major is sociology...I've learnt how to see social problems more in-depth, but it is not quite useful in job searching. Few job posting indicates they need someone studying sociology, so I asked them if sociology graduates could apply for this position, they said the employer has specified that they need someone specialized in Chinese language and literature, or some other majors...many of employers don't know what sociology is, they think it is about socializing skills.

YL: Do you think why it's been difficult for new graduates to find a job?



Paul: What I know is that, since the expansion in 1999, the relationship between supply and demand of university graduates has changed. The supply and demand could reach balance before, but the sudden increase of university graduates makes this balance broken. On the other hand, after the expansion, the quality of students has been getting lower. Also, the social recognition of university students' social status has changed as well. University students are used to be considered elite, but now their positions has been lowered to the level of average labour.

Both Kevin and Paul pointed out the oversupply of university graduates caused by the expansion of higher education in China's manufacturing and labour-intensive industrial economy. James found that the lack of proper recognition of his major in labour market had become a barrier for him to look for job. Jennifer raised her concern over the unrestrained expansion of certain demanded majors without considering the quality of education and the capacity of labour market in long term. Thus, we can tell the conflicts derived from disconnections between university and labour market have been become severe barriers inhibiting smooth school-to-work transition among university graduates. Because the inflation of university degrees, university students gradually recognized that their advantaged status in job market has declined, which used to be guaranteed by highly restricted university enrollment and job assignment policy.

### ***6.3.3 Multiple Criteria in Recruitment Adopted by Employers***

After going through the university recruitment process which takes the NCEE grade as the single criterion, students who finally obtain a relatively advantaged position in the field of education are convinced that they will be able to maintain this advantaged position when moving into the field of labour market. However, unlike what they expected, in the contexts of inflation of university credentials and little restrictions on employment procedure after graduate job assignment system was rescinded in late 1990s, the employers gain dominant power and considerable flexibility in recruiting new university graduates, and they start to set multiple criteria in addition to academic performance and university credentials. As mentioned by a few

students as below, those criteria may include communication skill, hands-on ability, organization and management ability, and personality, or to be more specified, a degree from prestigious university, student cadre, communist party membership, certificate of certain skill (e.g. computer skill, English proficiency, human management skill, etc.), and work experience. Sometimes, employers even specify whether they prefer man or woman for certain position. Ian provided an insight regarding the unfairness of increasing criteria in recruiting new graduates, that the employers attempt to get the maximum benefits without even paying the cost of training entry level employees. The oversupply of university graduates in labour market and little public or governmental supervision over the recruitment process strengthen employers' dominant position in the field of labour market, and largely increase the vulnerability of new university graduates. In this condition, employers are allowed and able to find the best workforce with minimum costs in terms of payment and training.

YL: why do you think it's been difficult for new graduates to find a job?

Ian: There have been many news reports talking about this issue, some experts said this is because of decoupling between the elite education in China and the skills demanded in reality. Personally, I think enterprise employers should be more responsible for this. What they need is to maximize their profit, but they don't want to provide proper training course. When they recruit for a position, they want to hire someone who can do it right away, but new graduates from university are not able to achieve that requirement immediately, so they started to require many other things, like social practices, different kinds of certificates, experiences in student organizations, and they also want you have good academic performance. However, students' primary duty is still our schoolwork...I know we should have more social and practical experiences, but there is a decoupling between educational ideas and goals in university and employers' expectations. I'm not sure if it is true or not, just my personal thoughts.

YL: Do you know the situation of your classmates' job search?

Daniel: It's really difficult to find a job this year...Many employers didn't specify their requirements on specialization, so as long as you think your major is a little bit relevant, you can apply for it, so competitive. They don't select employees based on the knowledge you've learnt in university, they try to assess your potentials in different aspects during interview, say communication skills, hands-on ability, organization ability, morality, even personality.

YL: Do you think why it's been difficult for new graduates to find a job?

David: My personal opinion is that, in the first three years of university, majority of students don't have clear idea about what they want to do after graduate. They just feel they are university students, no need to worry about job hunting. It's not until the fourth year that they finally realize that there are too many university graduates, and those employers do not merely look at their bachelor degree, but it's too late.

Andy: I think when looking for jobs, it's more important to know how to communicate with others than learn knowledge from books. Also, I know that some companies have something like a checklist when they recruit new graduates from university. For example, if you graduate from a key point university, they will give you a score, say 30, if you are a student cadre, add 10, if you are a communist party member, add 10, you have some certificates, add 10, have work experience, add 25 or something, so on and so forth. Then, they will hire you based on the total score you get.

#### ***6.3.4 Employment Policies as Alternatives***

As we know, the Chinese government has been gradually losing control over labour market since 1990s. In this liberal market, employers have replaced the government becoming the dominant rule maker, and the current employment policies are mainly considered as the strategies to moderate social tensions caused by growing unemployment rate among university new graduates and provide some alternative opportunities to those who are in disadvantaged position to find job. The relatively well-acknowledged policies include: a 2-year term program to recruit public functionaries and teachers working in less developed rural areas; special loans for students who pursue self-employment; and enrollment expansion in graduate schools. These policies have been viewed as the short term strategies to postpone a portion of new workforces entering job market by many research participants such as Jason and Emma, and those policies are not considered as essentially beneficial for students.

YL: How do you think about the employment policy for new university graduates?

Jason: I think it has a little effect. I think that unless you are truly not able to find a job, have no other option at all, you may not consider those policies...just like to work as voluntary civil servant for three years in west China...my impression of this policy just includes two points, one is that the living condition would be harsh, second one is students who joined this project are allowed to extend the period of paying back student loan, and are eligible for some bonus marks after they finished their term after 2 years and would like to participate in graduate entrance exam

or national civil service exam. But I think this is just government's short term strategy, just wasting time. If you try your best to find an actual job, you can get much more experiences than joining those programs for two years.

Emma: Useless. The policy may be good, the intention may be good, but hard to implement...because just too many of them (couldn't find a job). The only thing they can do is to expand enrollment of graduate programs. The program encouraging university graduates work in the rural areas in western China shares the same motive, to postpone their entrance to labour market. Two or three years later, this group of people will have to face the same problem again...oh, they also provide special loan to university graduate to start their own business, this is so unrealistic. How can they do well in business without years of experiences and social networks? If they have that already, there wouldn't be problem for them to find a good job.

The employment policies have also been considered as options for disadvantaged students, but some respondents provided different opinions. For example, Jennifer and Daniel pointed out that the students from rural area would have little interests in participating in these projects, because it is contradictory to their original goal of attending university. Their ultimate goal was to be away from rural lifestyle and obtain urban citizen status eventually. Besides, Hanna also mentioned the social pressures preventing some students from participating in these programs. The disadvantaged students were expected by their parents and relatives to gain upward mobility by holding a degree from a key-point university; if they ended up getting a job in rural area, that would be considered as failing to achieve higher socioeconomic status.

YL: how do you think about employment policy for new graduates?

Jennifer: I don't know much. I just know they encourage students to go to the rural area, less developed area, or local community, like working in villages...as social workers. But, the students from good universities may not want to choose this path. They've been studying so hard for many years, so having that kind of job may be too different from what they expect. Especially the students from rural area, they worked so hard to be away from village, I don't think they would like to go back. I have a friend, she didn't want to join these programs because of that. I think if students have any other option, they wouldn't join these programs.

YL: how do you think about employment policy for new graduates?

Daniel: I know there have been more policies to encourage us go to west China, go to village...I think it may influence some students' choice, but to me, it is not an option...not considering economic condition, this choice is just not suitable for students from rural area, like me. I came

out from the west, from the village, just to find a way to get away from the past. I won't choose to go back to that kind of life again. The students who come from better economic background should consider this option.

YL: how do you think about the employment policies for new graduates?

Hanna: I think they might be useful for some students...but...for example, my friend's high school classmate chose to be an administrative staff in village, but she graduated from a bad university, so my friend feels lose face if she makes the same choice, since she graduated from Xi'an Jiaotong University. Although she was also from village, her parents wouldn't accept that. Others may think she is not good enough to get better job in cities...this kind of things are important.

Besides the critiques from most participants, there are some positive comments regarding the employment policies implemented by government. Lisa's positive perception came from her witness of the hardships in job search as well as the increasing number of applications for and attention on these employment programs from her schoolmates. Both Gary and Cindy considered the policies encouraging university graduates to work in rural area as both beneficial for the nation and students themselves, because ideally, the students can apply their knowledge to contribute to the development of less-developed areas in China, so the employment tension could be moderated, and the students would learn from these practical experiences. However, when looking into these students' background and situation, it's interesting to notice that these students either have been admitted to graduate school or come from advantaged families. As a student cadre, Lisa has parents and grandparents who are senior CPC members, and Gary's father is a manager and his mother is a teacher. Despite of all the positive remarks on employment policy, Cindy rejected the possibility for her to join these programs, because she had no intention to go back where she originally came from, a small village. Unfortunately, I was not able to invite students who had applied for any of these programs to participate in my study voluntarily. I had a potential candidate introduced by one of the interviewees, but she decided not to accept my interview due to her intense schedule. However, given that working in rural area is still

considered as moving down of social status in China, I cannot completely exclude another explanation for her rejection that is she might not be proud of talking about the decision she made.

YL: How do you think about the employment policies for new graduates?

Lisa: I think it's been useful, especially this year. I don't know much about it, because I get into graduate school, but many of my schoolmates are looking for jobs, it's been really difficult. I think based on the records from previous years, many new graduates would have signed the employment contract by now, but this year, not many. I know some of them have submitted the application to the Supporting Western China program, to be teachers. I originally thought there wouldn't be many applicants, but I was wrong, that program attracts lots of attention from students.

YL: How do you think about the employment policy for new graduates?

Gary: Very good. I think students should go to the less developed regions, then you can get more real life experiences. I grow up in the city, but now I am exposed to many students from rural area, I can tell that they think differently. I think they are smart and have some special wisdom. There was a saying that if you want to understand China, you want to understand a village first. I heard someone started his career in the village, and now he becomes the minister of a city government. So, I think the government policy is to solve unemployment issues, that's good for the nation in general, also can help the less developed region. As a citizen of this country, it's impossible for us to resist the social trend, then we want to adapt into it, and utilize it.

YL: How do you think about government policy for new graduates?

Cindy: I don't know much about it, just a little bit. I've heard of the policy like encouraging university graduates going to the west, going down to the village or local community, I think this is not bad...but I think nowadays, university students still have relatively high expectation, they like to stay in big cities, like doing white collar job with high salary, they should position themselves properly, how to say...like someone said, we are short of everything, but not university students. (laugh). I think the villages and local communities need more educated people, just...the economic and material conditions are not very good. But all the educated moved out from rural area to cities, this is not good for our country.

YL: Would you like to go down to the village if you were looking for job?

Cindy: Yes, I...(laugh), actually...no, I may not. To be honest, I said others should position themselves properly, but if that was me, I wouldn't go. I studied so hard for coming out from village, don't want to go back. (laugh)

## 6.4 Summary

The postsecondary transition and postgraduate transition are two critical transition processes experienced by Chinese university students. Due to dramatic social changes, inevitably, Chinese students confront challenges caused by significant institutional and contextual shifts in both transitions. However, a belief has been widely and strongly held by young students especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds until they actually have to experience the transition from university to work, that is university education will lead to higher social status and better quality of life. This common sense has been perpetuated among Chinese people through a long-established and institutionalized connection between examination and occupational/social position in history and modern time. However, after abolishing the graduate job assignment policy, liberalizing labour market, and years of expanding postsecondary education, the gap between university education and the demand of job market for new university graduates has significantly increased, and the increasing uncertainty of students' postgraduate achievement dispels their belief of the direct linkage between higher socioeconomic status and university degrees.

Nevertheless, because the assessment of young people's achievements is still institutionally restricted to the grade of examinations before postsecondary education, for students coming from disadvantaged background, more education is still the exclusive and most effective way to climb up the social ladders, as long as their goal of having higher quality of life and social status remains. Since university degree becomes a required but unprivileged capital in job market for most university graduates, they tend to acquire other forms of capital in order to compete for better positions when entering the field of labour market. In the next Chapter, I will

elaborate on the acquisition of and conversion between different forms of capitals by certain level of strategic agency of university students.



## **Chapter VII**

### **Qualitative Analysis on Agency: Typology, Forms of Capital, and Habitus**

In the previous chapters, I provide mainly a descriptive analysis of participants' account of their decision on pursuing university education and postgraduate plan, as well as their perception of the ways in which institutional and social contexts may have shaped their postgraduate transition. In the following chapter, I will provide more interpretative analysis of the interview data, to understand participants' understanding of their own agency in their postgraduate transition process. I'm most interested in analyzing narratives of participants' strategic decisions and actions in university and pursuing their postgraduate goals. The narratives will provide me rich information to categorize different types of agency based on the postgraduate goal they decided as well as the means they adopted. I have already pointed out that the majority of participants share a common sense lifeworld before they were actually facing the postgraduate transition, generally speaking, that is university education is considered as the primary means leading to better quality of life and higher social status, and they also know that taking the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) is the only way to access university education. However, after the students gradually recognize that university degree and grades in exams are neither the only nor the most important criteria in job search process, sooner or later, they start intentionally or unintentionally identifying, seeking and utilizing different forms of capitals to achieve their postgraduate goals. In this process, they may realize that university education as an institutional means does not necessarily lead to higher socioeconomic status as a socially accepted goal, in other words, the competence of academic qualification has been largely weakened in competing for a higher position in the job market for university graduates in China. Thus, other forms of capital become increasingly valuable for university graduates. How

different forms of capital are produced, reproduced and converted in the fulfillment of participants' postgraduate plans will be analyzed and categorized.

As introduced in Chapter 3, Merton's typology of modes of individual adaptation offers a tool to develop a typology of agency based on the individual acceptance and rejection of cultural goal and institutional means, which includes five types: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. Among all types of agency which I can identify through interpretative analysis of participant's narratives, conformist agency is the dominant type, but with some variations. Firstly, I would like to introduce two successful cases in achieving socially accepted postgraduate goal by adopting conformist type of agency.

### **7.1 Conformist Agency**

Although born in the city, Rebecca used "poor" to describe her family financial situation. Three kids in this family, Rebecca, her younger brother and sister, are all in university, so her parents had to work really hard and saved money to support their education. Her father is a junior high school physics teacher, and considered as a life mentor by Rebecca.

Rebecca: From elementary school, high school, to university, this is a path everyone else and my parents approve, I must approve it as well, also I am so willing to walk on this path...My father often told me, you have to write more, publish more...actually, I didn't publish much, just one or two articles, but he pushes me to do more, makes me get such consciousness (of publishing articles), so I would know which direction I should go, and what I should do in university. He knows that the students studying Chinese language and literature are not busy with their schoolwork at all in university. Four years, time just flies. He knows these students so well.

YL: How could he know about that?

Rebecca: He was in college before, studying physics, but he ran into some students from Chinese literature before.

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YL: what do you want to do after graduation?

Rebecca: I originally wanted to be a teacher. My grandpa, my father, and some of my cousins...they all are teachers. Growing up in such environment, I understand everything about a teacher. I like this job due to understanding. I think this is a respected job. I worked as a tutor for high school students before. I think I can be a good teacher...but most of those good schools only recruit teachers from Normal Universities, so it's kind of difficult for me to get a teaching job in high school. But now, I've found a job already...feel more confident now.

YL: what kind of job?

Rebecca: I find a job in X Satellite Launch Center, it is military establishment. My job is to do publicity, to write something like news report and articles.

YL: How did you get this job?

Rebecca: They held a job fair, I handed in my resume, then they called me to have an on-site interview, finally, I get this job.

YL: Is it your ideal job?

Rebecca: Yes, I feel lucky to get it. I know many students applied this position, I didn't expect they would choose me. The offer they provided is very attractive, you can get a military rank when get in, everyone admires that. Someone told me that they don't recruit girls, but I just wanted to give a shot...the procedure is a bit challenging, but I made it. I'm very lucky.

Influenced by her parents and relatives, Rebecca naturally accepted university education as a necessary path in her life course and inherited a career goal of becoming a teacher. Although she obtained some cultural capital of being teacher through her family, she also recognized that her university degree may not be competitive enough for a high school teacher position due to lack of professional recognition. Eventually, she found a job which matches her specialty in Chinese language and literature, and is admired by many other students. I may be able to conclude that Rebecca presents a successful conformist agency in her postgraduate transition, but this finding cannot answer questions like, in what way her agency is enabled or constrained in this process, and why she is able to successfully achieve her goal with the means of university education. In order to answer these questions, we need to have further analysis on the composition of the capitals she possesses. Firstly, even though she emphasized her family financial difficulties during the interview, her father's inculcation and postsecondary experiences

regarding Chinese language and literature discipline, as well as relatives' examples actually transmitted a good quality of cultural capital to her.

Rebecca: ... My grandpa likes ancient poems a lot, so I just followed him and read many poems since I was young. Many verses inspired me a lot... In my fourth year of university... I start to have interests in Beijing Opera and Shaoxing Opera. Because I know so much about ancient literatures, I can perceive the meanings of the verses in opera very well. They are really beautiful with glorifying content, teaching us to be kind, to be loyal to your motherland, to treat parents with filial piety. I think the essence of Confucian culture can be shown in those operas, including benevolence, justice, courtesy, wisdom, faith, gentle, modest and courteous... I think ancient poems and operas truly influence me a lot, I will take them as my lifelong hobby.

Essentially, grandpa's interest in Chinese traditional literatures brought her a value system of Confucianism, which has been dominant in China for thousands of years. Even though such a value system has been weakened in modern China, it is still widely accepted as righteous and correct values. From young age to university, she has made this value system inherent in her consciousness, becoming her cultural capital. In addition to that, Rebecca was able to convert the cultural capital she possesses into other forms of capital, especially social capital.

YL: Do you like to make friends?

Rebecca: Of course, making friends is important, as Confucius said, 'Whenever I walk with two other men, I can find teacher among them'<sup>21</sup>. I want to learn from different people. We have a online social networking site at university website, I like to search the students who are kind and have merits on there, although they didn't know me at that time, I would add them as my friends on my campus web-account<sup>22</sup>. I would read things they wrote, comment on what they posted, and learn things from them. Gradually, they might start to know me...

YL: Did you attend any student organizations or campus clubs?

Rebecca: Yes. I attended some in my first couple years... I am not doing it now, but I still keep in contact with the responsible officials of several campus clubs or student organizations, some of them are my good friends.

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YL: How did you get the internship opportunity at cctv.com?

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<sup>21</sup> A verse from the Analects of Confucius.

<sup>22</sup> A networking tool similar as Facebook.

Rebecca: it's my friend, I knew her when she was here (Lanzhou University). She worked there, and did very well. It was last summer, I called her to see if she could help me find an internship opportunity in cctv.com. She agreed, but when I got in, the recruitment was done, so I couldn't be a formal internship student. She told me to just do whatever they told me to do, but there wouldn't be an internship certificate after it's done. I said, it's okay, I just wanted to learn something. Eventually, one internship student quitted, there was a vacant position, so I filled in.

YL: What did you learn from that internship?

Rebecca: I've learnt a lot. I feel it widens my vision, my way of thinking. I stay in Lanzhou for too long, if I didn't go to Beijing, I wouldn't know how narrow-minded I was. Also, to feel the intense stress, be competitive, you have to compete with others everyday in you work...I also improve my computer skill a lot...I was too slow at very beginning, because I didn't have a computer for myself, mainly due to financial reason, that's why I bought a computer right after I came back from that intern.

With clear and strong motives of "learning from different people", Rebecca carefully chose her friends, and made efforts to maintain and improve interactions with them. The time and energy she invested in friendships convert strangers to her *Guanxi* contacts, and one of them helped her get an internship position in a division of the CCTV (China Central Television). The internship experience provides her considerable cultural capital.

YL: Are you a Communist Party member?

Rebecca: Yes. I just became a CPC member this year. I thought I could get in last year, but I didn't, perhaps other people are better than me, or my social activity has been recognized by my classmates and teachers.

YL: Why did you want to join the Communist Party?

Rebecca: I think...a membership of Communist Party embodies a person's advancement, I mean, in China. Also, we, human beings, should have a belief...

YL: What kind of belief in your mind?

Rebecca: How I can describe it...I think...it is steadfastness. Not afraid of 'eating bitterness'<sup>23</sup>. When you are assigned any duty by the Party, no matter how difficult it is, I just feel I want to accomplish it, no excuse. I don't know how to express it precisely. As a communist party member, when something happen, you have to stand out first, no excuse for not doing it...I find I can improve myself very much after being a Communist Party member, I used to complain more...I guess that's one of the reasons I get that job. At the interview site, there was another girl, we were

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<sup>23</sup> A Chinese phrase for enduring hardship, known as Chi Ku.

competing for this position. After the first round of interview, it seemed that they couldn't make final decision, because we both are very good candidate. During the break, we talked, it sounded that she was not quite determined to get this job, she actually want to work closer to her hometown. In the second round, they asked me how much I would like to work there, since it is in very remote area, and if I could handle the hardships. I told them that I was very determined to work here if I could get his job, I don't mind eating bitterness for my ideal at all. Eventually, they chose me...Actually, although I was born in the city, I am more able to endure hardship than other city girls. When I was young, my father sent me to the village, and asked me to work in the field with my peasant relatives. I know how hard it is working in the field, and I can handle the hardship.

YL: Do you think they gave you offer also because you are a CPC member?

Rebecca: Oh, you have to be a Communist Party member, otherwise, they wouldn't give you interview opportunity.

In addition to *Guanxi* networks, Rebecca's CPC membership as an institutionalized social capital provides her accessibility to certain job sector which is not accessible for non-CPC membership.

YL: Do you think why the employer wants to hire you?

Rebecca: I think it is my attitude and personality. I did have lots of job interview experiences. I got two offers before this one, one is to be a web administrator in a software company, I declined it after finish internship, because I feel my personality doesn't fit that working environment...the other one is to be a sale person, I didn't expect they gave me offer, but they did. After thinking for a while and consulting with my dad, I declined that one too...I think that's not the direction I want to go...based on these experiences, I think those employers pay attention to your social practices, innovation, especially interpersonal skills, this is an important ability, it's not you have to flatter others, but you want to make others feel comfortable to talk to you...you want to be humble and kind, try to learn from others.

...

In general, Rebecca's narratives about her social networking skills and job hunting experiences present a pattern of high level of conformist agency. Not only does she voluntarily accept university education as the necessary means to successfully achieve her postgraduate goal of finding a respected occupation, she also inherits, internalizes and utilizes cultural capitals which are highly consistent with the dominant social values and ideology. The cultural capitals

she initially acquired through inculcation and influence by family members, father and grandpa in particular, which cultivates a habitus of her to easily accept dominant social and political values and ideology in her further socialization. The cultural capitals she accumulated motivate and enable her to invest on social capitals effectively. Furthermore, she converted the social capitals into more and other types of cultural capitals, for example, social practices and technical skills gained through internship. Eventually, the cultural capitals she has acquired, including social practices, technical skills, and inherent dominant ideology, all contributed to the achievement of her career goal.

Although Rebecca's family background was not considered as the privileged in terms of financial situation, her well-educated parents and relatives still transmitted to her the embodied cultural capitals of high quality. Nevertheless, in order to achieve her ideal postgraduate goal, she had to invest considerable amount of time and energy to make the conversions between cultural capital and social capital. For the conformist agency coming from more privileged background, its capital conversions would require much less investment of time and energy for achieving the socially accepted goal.

For example, Lisa, a sociology student, was born in a privileged family. Her father was a senior manager handling financial affairs in a public-owned enterprise. All her grandparents are senior CPC members and cadres.

YL: Why do you want attend university?

Lisa: It's not like you must go to university, it's that you've reached that level, having this very positive life attitude, if you can do it, then you want to do your best. Seeing all your classmates worked so hard for getting into university, you want to do the same.

YL: Why did you choose sociology as your first choice in your application?

Lisa: ...since I was young, I've had a goal to be a public servant, so when I applied for major, sociology seemed very interesting...I originally wanted to go to Beijing for university, but my NCEE score was not as high as I expected...eventually, I chose Xi'an Jiaotong University as my teacher recommended. My score was right on their admission line. At that time, my parents didn't tell me that if I couldn't make it, they had had special arrangement for me in Beijing through their personal contacts, that was my ideal university. But I came here. I never feel regret. I am happy with the four years I spent here.

YL: What do you want to do after graduate?

Lisa: I have already been admitted by the graduate program of sociology department here with exemption of National Graduate Entrance Exam<sup>24</sup>. I think I choose to stay here, mainly because I don't want see them worry too much. I originally had a chance to have an exam-exempted admission from another university in Beijing which I wanted to get in the most, but my parents need to do a lot for me, not easy. I don't feel very comfortable to make my entire family involved in this matter just for myself. My parents hoped I could stay here, so I respect their will. I want to study abroad, and the sociology department here has an exchange program (with a university abroad). I think sociology in China has not been a mature discipline yet, since I choose this discipline, I want to study it well.

YL: What do you want to do after finish graduate study?

Lisa: Now, I am not so eager to be a public servant as I was before, but if I have chance, I think I will still go that direction...working in students' association helps me know more about the different aspects of society. I've learnt a lot, about how to do things, how to communicate with others...People say, university is a small society, it is very true. After experiencing lots of things in students' association, I think I've grown up quite a bit. I've seen different sides of society, and have gained a sense of what this society needs, that's the direction you want to go.

Based on Lisa's account of how she made decisions about university and choice of major as well as her postgraduate plan, I find that she has been holding a career goal largely influenced by her grandparents, to be a public servant in government. She knows university education is the necessary means to achieve that goal, and she chose her major based on her career goal. She also decided to pursue further education even in other country in order to continue walking toward the direction she planned. Thus, it's not difficult to categorize her agency as conformist agency.

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<sup>24</sup> In general, there are two ways to get into graduate programs in Chinese educational institutions. One is to take the National Graduate Entrance Exam (NGEE) and be given interview opportunity by the graduate program one applied, based on their NGAE scores; another one is to be admitted by particular graduate program with no requirement of the NGAE score. Usually, the later one takes place if the student studied in the undergraduate program at the same or academically related university, with outstanding academic or/and practical performances in university.



Even though it seems that she fulfilled her goal independently, it's not difficult to recognize that her possession of social capital can be directly transmitted from her family members. In both important transitions, she had opportunities to utilize her parents' social capital to achieve her ideal transitional goals, but she chose not to. Rejection of using this resource doesn't deny its availability for her. Based on her narratives, she might be able to take even faster track to achieve her goal if she utilized these social capitals. To some extent, Lisa's parents empowered her with availability of better alternatives. In addition, even though Lisa attempted to demonstrate her independent agency, her dispositions have been highly influenced by her privileged family background.

YL: Are you a CPC member?

Lisa: Yes, (I've become a CPC member) since high school. Because I lived with my grandparents for a long time, all my grandparents from my mother side and father side are senior CPC members. My grandparents from my father side were in military force before they were retired. My grandma from mother side was the first dean of the College of Preschool Education in our province, and my grandpa from mother side worked in the Provincial Party School<sup>25</sup>. So, you should know how I feel about Communist Party. I'm that kind of kid walking on flat path, so families always expect me to excel. My grandpa from mother side always wanted me to join the CPC, and grandparents from father side would be happy about it as well. I think this is a way to show excellence and advancement, so I applied for joining Communist Party in high school, all my classmates found me weird...(laugh)...I was so passionate about it at that time.

...

When I was kid, my parents were busy with their work, so I stayed with my grandma for a long time, since she really knows preschool education...but my mother spent lots of money to cultivate me.

YL: In what aspects did your mother cultivate you?

Lisa: Well, I learned whatever I wanted, not only the things I wanted to learn, but also the things I didn't want to learn, they forced me to learn. I started learning painting since 3 years old, then

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<sup>25</sup> The local branch of the Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (*Zhōnggòng Zhōngyāng Dǎngxìào*), which is also known as the Central Party School, the highest institution to train new officials for the CPC.

piano, gymnastics, dancing, so on and so forth since I was 6 years old. I didn't like playing piano, my mother made me learn by spanking me. (Laugh)

...

YL: Have you ever thought of working rather than studying in graduate program?

Lisa: No. I know I can find an okay job now. I was in charge of collecting and distributing employment information for students, so I think I can meet many employers' requirements, but I still have that ideal, to be a good public servant. I need more knowledge and better vision to be in that position. Even though I might eventually change mind, more knowledge will be helpful for my career in future anyway.

YL: Why are you able to be admitted by the graduate program without the exam?

Lisa: You know, just like other graduate programs, they have criteria and formula to calculate a total score to assess students' performance, mainly including your GPA, whether or not you are a student cadre, engagement of college and departmental activities, such and such. ...I became a student cadre immediately after I got into university...

YL: How did you make it?

Lisa: Teachers selected me based on my high school record. You know, I'm a very competitive student, I always want to do my best, I was like that since elementary school (Laugh), so the university teachers had already known I could be a good candidate of student cadre based on my high school record. They sent me an application for a special program of training university student cadres along with the university admission letter, so I came here earlier than other first year students to join that program. I was able to know many other student cadres in that program.

From the conversation above, I can tell that Lisa was able gain cultural capitals through parents and grandparents since she was born. The cultural capitals include different types of cultural skills, such as, painting, dancing, playing piano, etc., which require considerable investment of economic capital, time and energy; a strong propensity to be a CPC member which was directly influenced by her grandparents; and a sense of competition and motivation to excel in order to gain recognition from family members, teachers, or society at large. Eventually, she was able to gain benefits from all the investment on cultural capitals, showing her ability to achieve her short-term goal of graduate study and possible long-term career goal of being government official, even without utilizing the social capitals available for her.

It seems that practicing conformist agency successfully is not a difficult mission for the students from privileged families. Then, I would like to find out how disadvantaged backgrounds would impact a conformist agency.

Emma, a sociology student, was born in a peasant family living in a village. She has an older brother, an older sister, and a younger brother. According to her, although it was not a very difficult decision to make for going to university, but it wasn't a smooth transition for her from junior high school to senior high school<sup>26</sup>.

YL: Do you have any brother or sister getting into university as well?

Emma: No, just me. My older sister did the best in school among us, but since she is the oldest, and there are four kids in my family, she didn't go to university, but chose to go to a normal vocational school after junior high. Now, she is a teacher. Both my older and younger brother didn't do well in school, actually my parents wanted them to go to university, not me, but eventually, all the resources are used to support my university education.

YL: Why didn't your parents want you to go to university?

Emma: well, because I'm a girl. When I was in junior high, my parents told me not go up to senior high, just let my older brother go, ...but he didn't make it, and went to a vocational school. Although my family is poor, my parents still support kids to go to school.

YL: What experience have you had so far affecting you the most?

Emma: Getting into senior high school. When I was in junior high, ...my mother, aunt, and other relatives all tried to convince me not go to senior high school, they were like, 'please don't go, it's just too difficult for your mother'. I almost wanted to cry, and said, 'Fine! If you guys stop me going to school, I will kill myself!' I did very well in school at that time, why stop me going to school! ...You know, it's hard for a girl to go to school in my village. But it was a heavy financial burden on my family, now thinking back, I start to feel I was... so bad, not filial to my parents at all, I should comply with my own fate, to relieve my parents' burden, but I just felt I should fight for a better future for myself at that time. ...Now, I sometimes feel regret for my decision. I make my parents working extremely hard. If I just went to a vocational school, I would start making money long time ago, just like my brothers and sister. I wouldn't be rich, but I could support my parents.

YL: What will you do after you graduate from university?

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<sup>26</sup> Receiving senior high school education indicates a student's aspiration to receive university education in near future, otherwise, specialized vocational education would their choice after graduate from senior high school.

Emma: I have been admitted as graduate student by XX University with exemption of the exam. I was recommended by the sociology department here, and I went there for interview, then they gave me offer...

YL: What do you want to do after finish your graduate study?

Emma: Look for job. I think I will accumulate enough human capital and social capital during the time of doing graduate study. Then I will find a job, work hard and accumulate social capital and economic capital. Eventually, I want to be self-employed, start my own business. I don't want to be managed by others. I want to work for myself. ... I want to help my family with my own ability. I want my parents be proud of me. I have a slogan, breaking out from our village (Laugh), meaning to be the number one rich family in our village, so that my parents, brother and sister don't have to ask for help from others.

Emma can be considered as having a conformist agency. She firmly held the socially accepted goal and adopted the means, despite the disapproval from family members due to strong gender discrimination in rural area as well as the lack of economic capital. In rural China, traditionally, boys are privileged in allocation of resources especially when there is shortage of economic resource. Just like many young people who have to overcome financial difficulties in pursuing university education, Emma wanted to change her own vulnerable position, and more than that, she intended to change her entire family's socioeconomic status, all through her education.

Having been studying sociology for almost four years, she has a rough understanding of the concept of capitals and what kinds of capital she needs to accumulate in the process of receiving education, but the accumulation is not an easy process for her. Unlike Lisa and Rebecca who invest a large amount of their energy and time in university on accumulating social capitals and the cultural capital beyond the academic type, Emma has to really work on acquire economic capital to support her education and the academic type of cultural capital.

Emma: I never ask for money from my parents during university, except the first year, I brought tuition fee from home, my parents borrowed that money for me. I worked from the first to the last

year. ...I have scholarship for two years, and ... get student loan for three years. I know I have to study hard to get scholarship, and ...I must get student loan.

YL: Have you ever found any difficulty in study in university?

Emma: There were some difficulties at first. For example, I never touched computer before university, just like blind in computer skill, know nothing about it. ...The computer course is very difficult, I failed once, ...so I decided to use the clumsiest method, to memorize the entire textbook, finally, I get a pass, and the grade is surprisingly good (Laugh). I am not good at English either, my basic knowledge of English is not good enough, ...we don't have good English teacher in our high school...

YL: Do you like making friends?

Emma: I know making friends is important, but I only have few friends. It's... my personal problem. My personality is quite indifferent and resistant to external interference. ... I only have one very close friend from junior high school, we are still in touch. ...In junior high school, it was easier to make friend, because we all come from similar family background. In senior high school, it's quite different. I only make friend from similar family background as mine, easy to talk to.

YL: what do you often do if not studying?

Emma: I like reading fictions, some biographies, news, such and such... I start to feel I am so isolated from the outside world, I know nothing except for study. Now, I continue graduate study, so I am going to waste more than 20 years of time in school. Sometimes, I thought I should get some work experience and social experience, but still cannot decide. ...I think I must prepare myself for the outside world during graduate study.

YL: Did you ever join any student association or campus club?

Emma: I did join in some campus clubs in the first year, but I found they were not very interesting, so I quit.

YL: Do you have a minor degree?

Emma: Yes. I chose accounting, because I'm very interested in math in high school, but the course is getting more and more difficult, eventually I have to give up. I just barely passed all the exams, and get a certificate, not the degree.

Emma's narrative of her university life has three major implications. First, her phrase of "waste more than 20 years of time in school" implies her anxiety for success in converting the academic capital she has accumulated for a long period of time into economic capital, which can change her and her family's socioeconomic status. She gains such an expectation from the common sense reality, that more education leading to be better life. However, she gradually

recognizes that the academic qualification is only a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one, and she has to accumulate other types of cultural capital as well as social capital, in order to finally transform those capitals into economic capital. Secondly, within a limited period of time, it is almost impossible for her to be able to accumulate all types of capitals which are needed for getting better job, including economic capital which is important for maintaining her study, cultural capitals of academic type and non-academic type, as well as social capital. More importantly, she has to focus on her academic performance for getting scholarships and to catch up with many other students with better previous training, such as English proficiency and computer skills, because the social environment in which she has been socialized before university couldn't provide that. Thirdly, her class habitus impedes her from accumulating useful social capital. She is only able to make friends who share similar socioeconomic background and class habitus with her. Even worse, she finds that the higher level of education she receives, the less chance she gets to make friends from her original social class. Rather than try to establish new social networks in the field of university where she was currently positioned, she chose to isolate herself from this environment. Given the importance of social capital in one's career development in China, this class habitus may become a barrier for her to achieve career goal. Nevertheless, the cultural capital cultivated in university makes her distinguished from those who are still members of the lower social class.

YL: So, you are still not sure if this decision (go to university) is right or wrong?

Emma: Um...because I haven't contributed any to my family by now. I am an adult already. My younger brother just got married, I don't have money to buy him wedding presents. Now, I feel I am disconnected with my family, seems like I am in the heaven, and leave my parents on the ground. I go back home almost every half year, but having very little conversation with my parents, and just some family trivia when talking with my brothers and sister, no common topic, feel sad about it. ...I divide my life into two parts, one is before getting into university, another is after getting into university. In high school, I just stayed at school, and learned knowledge from books, knew nothing else, but university is different environment, I have run into a variety of

things and people. I feel lucky to be here, a big city, otherwise, my vision would be so narrow, just like my brothers, but I still feel regret for not going to Beijing.

Emma's class habitus in building social networks and the cultural capital she developed during university put her in dilemma. She found herself become increasingly disconnected with her family members who are still at the original social status, but her class habitus makes her reluctant to build new social networks with students from higher socioeconomic status. Emma's account of career goal indicates that one of her primary motives to pursue higher education and wealth is to seek attention and appreciation from parents, so maintaining close relationship with her family member is very important for her. Thus, the dilemma she has to face is that the more education she receives, and the more successful she may be in future, the less connected she may feel with her family members and friends whom she actually wanted to be emotionally close to.

I tend to consider Emma's case as successful conformist agency due to her achievement of her postgraduate goal of getting into graduate school, but still not sure that whether or not she is able to achieve her goal of finding an ideal job and making enough money to support her entire family after she finishes her graduate study. Pursuing graduate study has become a strategy for many disadvantaged students. They choose to postpone their school-to-work transition, attempting to collect more cultural and social capitals during graduate study, to increase the chance of successful transition in future. Thus, unlike Lisa who chose to pursue postgraduate degree because it is important for her life career, students like Emma have different mentality regarding why pursuing graduate study. For example, like Emma, both Cindy and Gary are from low SES family and will become state-funded graduate student in the next year. Gary's parents are peasants living in village, and Cindy's parents are peasant worker from a small village and currently living in a small town. Their accounts of why they pursue graduate study are as follows.

Cindy: I really want to get in graduate program, because I think, like start working, I am really not ready for that yet, I have so many problems. ...If I go back to the small town I lived before, I think I may do well, but my goal is higher than that, I want to live a happy and comfortable life in a more developed place.

Gary: ...I never think of looking for job after university. I want to be a graduate student, staying in university for two or three years more. ...It's good that I will be state-funded graduate student, otherwise, it would put on too much stress on my parents. I am used to this environment now, try to prepare myself more, study hard, maybe to be a teacher or public servant in future. I want a stable life, following routines.

I have mentioned a few successful cases of conformist agency in university postgraduate transition. Successful case can refer to the students like Lisa and Rebecca, who either have achieved the position they aspired for, or have inherited and accumulated sufficient resources to reach that position in future. Besides, the students like Emma, Cindy, and Gary can be considered as successful cases, even though I am not sure whether or not they are able to achieve the position they aspire for after finish graduate study, but at least, they are able to accumulate considerable volume of cultural capitals in the form of skill and academic qualification, so that they have better chance to achieve their goal of getting out from their original class especially peasant class.

Nevertheless, I have no lack of examples of unsuccessful conformist agency. Born in a poor peasant family, Paul had gone through a very difficult process in order to get into university, mainly due to financial difficulties and disapproval from parents because of it. He got into university and supported his university education through part-time work, student loan, and student subsidies. Although he failed once, he still had an insistent mind to get into the graduate program in one of the most prestigious universities in China which was based on his belief that education is the exclusive means for him to achieve higher socioeconomic status.

YL: What do you want to do after graduate?



Paul: Go to graduate school. It's very difficult to find a good job with sociology degree in this economic situation (referring to economic crisis), so I want to learn more. ...but I failed this time.

YL: Did you want to get into the graduate program here?

Paul: No, I applied for Peking University, 20 marks lower than their cut-off line.

YL: Still sociology?

Paul: Yes.

YL: What do you want to do now?

Paul: I will try again next year. I will study harder. But I need to find a job to feed myself first, doesn't matter what kind of job, as long as I can feed myself. ...I know someone tried four times (Laugh).

YL: why do you want to get into graduate school so much?

Paul: I think this is the only way to change my life. I don't want to be like my parents, working on the farmland, staying in the village for their entire life, too difficult. ...it's not I cannot do it, but I'd rather not if I have a chance.

## **7.2 Semi-conformist Agency**

Among the students with conformist agency, I've already found variations between the ways in which the disadvantaged and advantaged students accumulate, utilize, and convert between different forms of capitals to achieve the socially accepted goal. Through analysis, we can tell that although some of the conformist students failed to recognize the importance of other types of capital, they all valued university education and academic qualification as the necessary means to achieve their goals. However, among all the participants, I can find some students who tended to value less of university credentials which can be identified as the institutionalized state of cultural capital by Bourdieu.

Amanda: I first thought university education can change many things, but now I'm not thinking this way. I think it's useless. If I could choose again, I would do something else, as it's so difficult to find a job after graduate from university anyway. If I didn't go to university, I may start a small business, that might be better for me.

YL: How do your parents think about it?

Amanda: they must want me to go to university and study well, but I'm thinking differently now. You know, you don't have to get good GPA, as long as you have networks in your family, you are fine, you can find a good job. I know many students who did poorly in university, but their parents have networks, they can get a better job than those who got high grades in exams.

YL: What are you going to do after graduate?

Amanda: I will go to graduate study. (laugh)

YL: But you said even university education is useless.

Amanda: My parents and grandparents force me to get into graduate school. I didn't get full funding for my graduate study, but they said they will support me. ...They (father and grandpa) have university degree, so they think it is necessary for me to get more education. ...It's true that I cannot find a job now...I mean the actual job, not to be cleaner, waitress, or selling insurance. But, I honestly think we shouldn't look down upon labour work. Just like in Europe, they value labour work very much. If you don't go to university, you can do labour job, still pay well, with modern technology, it won't be too tiresome. If these jobs are paid well in China, I wouldn't go to university. Now, in China, many jobs shouldn't require university degree, high school graduates can do it, but they (employers) still ask for degrees, just too many university graduates, so you have to get the degree. Now, I feel you need a master's degree to find a job which a university graduate can do.

By denying university education as the indispensable means to achieve career goal, Amanda's narrative reveals that, on one hand, social capital transmitted from family members can be more beneficial than an academic qualification for one's school-to-work transition; on the other hand, academic qualification has significantly more symbolic meaning than an effective demonstration of one's actual cultural competence. Although the academic credential is still required by the labour market, it has been constantly devalued along with the expansion of university enrollment. Thus, it is interesting to find that although Amanda mentally rejects education as the necessary means leading to better life, she has to conform in action by continuing her university education and even pursuing graduate education due to social forces, such as pressures from her parents, the devaluation of labour work, and the devaluation of academic qualifications.

Unlike Amanda who has to continue taking education as a means leading to an uncertain end which is against her own will, Jack tended to reject that common sense regarding university education in mentality as well as in action by practicing the alternative – running small retail businesses, but he did admit that he still needed the academic qualification. Through benefiting from the social capital provided by his family members, he was able to successfully achieve his postgraduate goal.

Jack: I originally thought I had to go to university. My father has eight siblings, including my father, six of them went to university. One of my cousins is studying broad, another cousin enters Peking University. I would feel really bad about myself if I didn't go.

YL: how about now?

Jack: Now, I don't think university is necessary. I think you can learn things outside the university as well, maybe you can even learn more. I don't define learning as reading books, ...I don't like things on the books, ...you can learn things from having fun... Since I was kid, I didn't want to follow the orders. As long as teachers said it was required to do such and such things, I just felt not like doing it.

YL: Have you ever received any scholarship?

Jack: (laugh) never. I didn't spend much time on studying. I failed couple courses, but I made it up, I did study to pass exams, because I need that degree. But I did lots of other things.

YL: Like what?

Jack: I sell things on campus, ...quite a few things. I engaged in different kinds of sports, although I am not good at them...

YL: what do you want to do after graduate?

Jack: I want to work in big corporation. It's hard to be at management level when you just enter, so I can start from lower position.

YL: Have you found that type of job?

Jack: Yes.

YL: How did you find it?

Jack: My family member recommended me to that employer. He gave me an interview opportunity, and after one month, they called me to sign contract.

YL: Did you look for jobs by yourself before that?

Jack: Yes, I did. I sent out many resumes, but haven't heard back from any of them.

According to the typology of agency, I would like to categorize the students like Amanda and Jack as semi-conformist agency. They have a mentality of rejecting university education as the only means but still accepting the cultural goal of pursuing higher quality of life, however, at the same time, they never stopped adopting the institutional means in action. Albeit they intended to be innovative, the actual outcome shows more conformist agency in them. The inconsistency between mental propensity and actual action implicates the power of structure in restricting individual agency.

### **7.3 Retreatist and Ritualist Agency**

By adopting Merton's typological tool, I am able to not only identify the majority of participants as conformist or semi-conformist agency in their university postgraduate transition, but also discover a couple of cases which can be categorized as ritualism or retreatism. Ritualism refers to rejection of cultural goal and acceptance of institutional means, and retreatism means to reject both cultural goal and institutional means. It is important to emphasize a precondition in this study before discussing the ritualism and retreatism, that is all the participants are conformist despite of variations in their positions and dispositions at the point when they successfully made the transition from senior high school to university. However, after moving out from original social contexts and getting into university for about four years, variations are generated in propensities and practices during the interactions between students' agency and external structure, which may lead to changes in aspiration and practice, especially when they notice that they are not able to successfully practice conformist agency. In this study, I am able to identify couple of cases transforming from conformist agency to retreatist or ritualist agency.

Abby was born in a peasant family. As required by her parents, she studied hard in high school and got into university, studying Chinese language and literature, even though she had little idea about university education.

YL: How do you think about your specialty?

Abby: I originally wanted to choose economics, but I had little idea about applying university and major. I wanted to get into a better university. Finally, I ended up here, actually, I am not quite sure why. (Laugh) We are required to read books after class, but I am not very interested in it, so I don't feel like to read, no feeling for it.

YL: Are you working on another major<sup>27</sup> now?

Abby: I thought about it, then I gave up, too difficult.

YL: Have you ever joined any student association or student club?

Abby: No...oh, yes, I joined one in the first year, but I didn't go to their meetings. (Laugh)

YL: What do you do after class?

Abby: Watch TV shows...Oh, I worked in a super market run by university. It has work-study program to provide students some work opportunities. I worked there for more than three years. Last term, I quit.

YL: How do you think about it?

Abby: Just make some money. If you did well in your position, you can get promotion, but I don't get any promotion. (Laugh)

YL: Have you ever thought about learning something else, say to get some skill certificates?

Abby: No. I don't have that mindset. I even didn't take that computer rank exam<sup>28</sup>.

YL: Are you a CPC member?

Abby: No, but I am applying for it now.

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<sup>27</sup> Now, some Chinese universities may provide students with an opportunity to choose a second major. There are mainly two types of program, one is "double-major", providing major degree and requiring relatively high GPA on the courses required by the second major, the other one is "minor degree", only requiring students to pass the exams and providing certificate other than degree. This has been an effective way for students to have a second chance to choose their college majors. Students can learn what they are interested in learning and do not have to bother with the cumbersome procedures in transferring majors. This system has been widely adopted in most colleges and universities.

<sup>28</sup> National Computer Rank Examination (NCRE) in China issues certificate to demonstrate an individual's level of computer skill, which is officially recognized by Ministry of Education of the PRC.

YL: Why do you want to join the CPC?

Abby: I think as a girl studying humanities, CPC membership can be helpful, ...girls like stable jobs, say working in government agency.

YL: What do you want to do after graduate?

Abby: I really don't know. (Laugh) I am not sure what kind of job I should look for. I don't ask for much, as long as I can feed myself, it's fine, so if they recruit secretary or staff, I will submit my resume. ...To be honest, I don't want to work, I would rather be a housewife, my biggest goal is to have a happy family. (Laugh)

YL: Do you think university education is beneficial to you?

Abby: Well...I think...why our country needs university graduates? Ideally, a university graduate needs to make more contribution to the country and society. I just want to be a secretary or something like that, I guess high school education is good enough for me. But my father said, you have to study hard, go to university, then you can stay in city, never have to come back to the village. But, I don't mind go back.

It seems that Abby did not express explicit rejection to university education, but in fact, except for an attempt to acquire CPC membership, she had very limited practices which are widely conducted by most university students, such as accumulating cultural capital through working hard on their own major or/and another discipline, collecting social capitals through participating student organizations or student clubs, taking exams to obtain skill certificate(s), or collecting work experience which may benefit job searching. In addition, her postgraduate goal is particularly ambiguous, and her life goal is to be a good housewife, that's an response people wouldn't expect from a university student. Examining her remarks on university education, I can tell that compared to Abby, her parents are more motivated to see her get into university and eventually be away from village and agricultural work, but this external force has not been fully internalized in Abby's consciousness, and she considered herself as not belonging to university. Thus, by holding on her habitus with little interactions with university context, she rejected both institutional means and cultural goal which are widely accepted by university students, and became a retreatist.

Another interesting case comes from Jerry. As a student studying philosophy, Jerry is interested in reading, writing, gaining more “profound thoughts over social issues”, but after four years of university life, he started to perceive his university education and career goal differently.

YL: Are you a CPC member?

Jerry: No...(Laugh). This is a problem, a big problem. We study philosophy, especially western philosophy, the more you learn, the more critical thinking you get. Our professors are quite open and straightforward (in terms of critique). Anyway, it makes you feel less and less interested in joining the CPC. Actually, my parents always want me to join the CPC, they really do. To them, a CPC membership can bring me more opportunities in looking for job, for example, public servant and some jobs in public-owned enterprise do require it. ...that's a problem of studying philosophy, perhaps, I just feel betray my discipline if I join the Party.

YL: Have you ever participated in any student association or clubs?

Jerry: Yes, I joined in quite a few student clubs in my first and second year. I was a very self-restraint person in high school, I was good at nothing except for studying. But I felt some changes in me after entered university. I did something crazy in my first year. I read a poem which was written by myself in front of thousand people. I don't know how I could do that. I don't think I can do that again (Laugh). I was a kind of person just like my parents, want a stable job and peaceful life. ...I found myself became very active in the first and second year, but, now I feel like go back to the old me again.

YL: Why?

Jerry: I think I have more and more interests in philosophy, especially when I started to prepare for the graduate entrance exam. I find I am getting more and more isolated. It was easy for me to stay in my room and read all day without talking to anyone. I can isolate myself from the outside world.

YL: Why do you want to go to graduate school?

Jerry: I study philosophy, it's too difficult to find a job with a bachelor degree in philosophy, also I want to stay in school, perhaps to be a teacher in university, that's stable.

YL: Then, do you get into graduate study?

Jerry: No...I failed...have nothing to talk about. I can talk more if I made it. (Laugh)

YL: What do you want to do now?

Jerry: I don't know, really don't know, maybe try to find a job first, maybe I will try to get into graduate study next year. In university, I read many books, history, philosophy, literature with no clear goal, but now I feel like I didn't read anything. I have no backbone in my knowledge.

Reading is the lifestyle I dream for, opening a book store, reading lots of books, reading every day.

YL: How do you think about university education?

Jerry: No matter what, it influences me so much, I think people should attend university.

YL: Have you ever felt regret for choosing philosophy?

Jerry: Hard to tell...perhaps if I can choose again, I may not choose philosophy, because right now I may not have a bright future, and I will not make lots of money by studying philosophy. If I learn a more useful and practical major, perhaps, I would think about how to make money, and I wouldn't feel so difficult to find a job. After learn philosophy, ...I feel I start caring little about grade, I become more and more self-restraint, not aggressive at all, and I care little about money and many other things. ...I am so influenced by Zhuangzi<sup>29</sup>, Socrates, and Marx, based on my readings, actually, I feel if you truly want to possess something, you must learn how to detach yourself from that thing. I think that's a high level of thought I should try to reach.

According to Jerry's narrative, he was born in a working class family in Zhejiang, one of the wealthiest provinces in China, and he never feels intensive financial stress in supporting university education, but he has noticed his habitus of enjoying "stable and peaceful" life which is transmitted from his parents. Although he got increasingly active and competitive in his first couple of years in university through interacting with an external university environment, his habitus immediately dominated his decision and practices when facing important transition in life course – the university postgraduate transition. During the interview, I attempted to gain more details about Jerry's short term and long term goals. Notwithstanding his lack of concrete goals since he failed to get into graduate school as he planned, his vague ideal has been presented as profoundly influenced by philosophy or a few philosophical thinkers. Those philosophical thoughts have been internalized into his consciousness, guiding him in the way of thinking and practicing. Without contradictions to his habitus, these philosophical thoughts actually reinforce his habitus and generate propensity to pursue detachment from materialistic and realistic life. Rather than consider reading or education as the means, he takes it as his ideal life goal. In

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<sup>29</sup> Zhuangzi was an influential philosopher and Taoist thinker who lived around the 4th century BC in ancient China.



general, by recognizing the tremendous influence from university education, Jerry positively accepts further education as the important means, but he tended to reject a socially accepted cultural goal of making money and having high quality of life as his life goal, due to his habitus as well as his internalized cultural capital acquired from philosophical knowledge. Without a clear and practical goal, reading books and education becomes ritualistic for Jerry. In this sense, he can be viewed as a ritualist.

#### **7.4 Rebellious Agency or Not?**

According to the typological tool suggested by Merton, rebellion represents “a traditional response seeking to institutionalize new goals and new procedures to be shared by other members of the society” and refers to “efforts to change the existing cultural and social structure rather than to accommodate efforts within the structure” (Merton, 1957, 140). Thus, this type of agency rejects and replaces both institutionalized means and cultural goals, and initiates interaction to structure with a goal of generating changes in the normative system. It’s rare to find a rebellious agency among individuals, but after analyzing all the narratives of my participants, it seems that there is an interesting case with certain level of rebellious agency. The following conversations give an account of his family background and pre-university experiences.

YL: why did you want to attend university?

Brandon: My family is single-parent family. My father passed away when I was in my second year of senior high school. At that time, many people thought it would be extremely difficult for me to go to university. However, I think I am a very determined person. I am different than them. I heard the teacher said that the government initiated a program in the western region of China, which provides financial assistant to poor students to cover their tuition fees and living expense if the student can maintain certain GPA. I applied for that scholarship and finally got it despite of some ‘interludes’ in the application process. ...Till now, I am still the only student getting into nationwide key-point university in my village, that’s a record in my village. I hoped my brother could break this record. He will take the NCEE next year.

YL: You said your major is history, right?

Brandon: Yes. After the NCEE, I asked my teacher about what major I should apply for, he said, you should apply for Chinese language and literature or history. I like reading books, especially about history. Perhaps, it is because my family. My grandpa was an intellectual, he had ever been a town chief, but he only knew reading books, he was not successful as a politician. My father was a high school student. You need to know that at that time, high school graduate was rare in village, but knowledge did not play a positive role in his life, he just became a ridiculously bookish person. Maybe I shouldn't criticize my father as his son, but I think critique shows love too. The self-esteem I gained in elementary school actually came from my father's taught of ancient poems and historical stories. My mother likes reading too, she can recite many long classic paragraphs in many books. My mother loves me very much. Sometimes, my mother, brother and I like to discuss and debate about what we read from books. ...My family had very little contact with our neighborhood, but we have consensus on many issues. ...We are the loners in our village, especially after I stood up against the town chief.

The "interlude" referred to by Brandon is about his application for disadvantaged student scholarship was held back, because he offended the town chief by mobilizing villagers and filing a complaint against him for occupying more land than he was supposed to. The town chief didn't get the extra land as he planned due to the strong protestation from the villagers who were primarily mobilized by Brandon. For revenge, the town chief held back his application from submitting to higher level of government. Brandon continued fighting for his right by writing letters to media. Eventually, with help from a righteous government official, his application was submitted and he got the scholarship.

Apparently, Brandon's story is quite different than other participants'. He inherited and developed reading habit from his parents and acquires critical thinking through reading and debating with his friends, teachers, and family members, therefore, he actually possessed considerable volume of cultural capital before university despite lack of economic capital. The mismatch between Brandon's position and possession of cultural capital enables him to view and think differently from other villagers, but to act and speak on behalf of them. Such cultural capital also motivates him to persistently pursue university education in order to achieve equilibrium of his position and habitus. In university, rather than adapt into the learning habit

widely adopted by the majority of university students, he maintained his original habit in reading and critical thinking by using all the resources available in and outside the university.

YL: How do you think about the university education you've received by now?

Brandon: In these four years, I've learnt very little in classroom or from textbooks. I think if you want to learn authentic knowledge in university in China, you want to talk to the people who are knowledgeable, wise, kind and righteous, you also want to travel, go to different places. You want to stay in library, read and think without instrumental goals. ...I did an experiment in university, in the exams, if I wrote down my own thoughts, the grade turns out not good at all, even though the professor said you could write down your own thoughts, but if I attend every class, memorize all the notes, and forget everything after exam, my grade can be higher.

Due to a strong interest in macro-history and politics in China, in the process of accumulating social capital and cultural capital, Brandon finally established his career goal that is to promote the development of non-government organization and civil society in China.

YL: What do you do except for reading and studying in university?

Brandon: Making friends. I believe when you are looking for someone, they are looking for you as well. The happiest time in university would be when several friends got together and talked about books in S bookstore. The owner is our friend too. I also travelled a lot, made different kinds of friend on my way...very interesting.

...

When I was in my fourth year, I have a new change. One of my friends is doing NGO work. After I learnt the concept and idea of civil society from him and understand the logic behind the action of NGO, I started to notice that mere critique is not enough, you need to have consciousness to critique, but also have the capacity to take action.

...

I did some work in a student club before. That club has become very influential now in Lanzhou University. ...Now, I still maintain very close relationship with the chairpersons of that club...I have always wanted to introduce the concept of NGO into student club...I'm trying to do it. I met a friend last year. ...Now, I am doing NGO things with him. His own experience is legendary. ... I admire his ability in taking action, that is quite different than many people who like talking ideal but never actually doing anything. I knew a person who couldn't practice their ideals and got lost, eventually decided to be a monk. ... Anyway, I feel that we need to continue working on NGO career, and we have been planning to run a social enterprise. Now, we run a school which is not free but very cheap, because we need money to live. I feel that NGO workers should live decent life, because if you look very shabby, those you want to help would be worried. If you cannot gain self-achievement, how you can help others...

YL: Why did you choose Lanzhou University?

Brandon: I originally want to go to Beijing, but it's too far away from home, and the living cost is high there. Every July, I need to go back home for harvest. I wanted to get into graduate study in F University, but failed, I still wanted to try. I want to continue studying, not because I need that degree. Many people take exams only because they want the credential, this kind of thought tarnishes knowledge. Since they can tarnish it, why shouldn't I pursue it? Nowadays, our university and society don't teach young people how to gain ideal. Young people only have desire, materialistic desire, no ideal. You want a big house, a good car, and lots of money, those are desires, not ideals. Desire is needed, but ideal is important too. ...I overheard two students' conversation yesterday, and the entire time, they were talking about how to get exam-exempted admission from graduate school, or how to get scholarships, but nothing about the actual knowledge they want to learn. ...so I think I need a new stage for me to exchange my thoughts. I want to talk to the people who are knowledgeable, insightful, and wise, so that I can improve myself. I've read so many books, but I won't take the things in books for granted.

YL: Why do you choose F University for your graduate study?

Brandon: Because I read a news story about the graduate school at F University admitting a tricycleman<sup>30</sup> into their Doctoral program, just based on his self-learning knowledge and experiences, even though he only had a high school diploma. It means they are very flexible and open-minded for discovering true talents. This matches my idea.

YL: Are you going to continue your NGO career as well?

Brandon: Of course. That's my lifelong career. ... I know it is very difficult thing in China, but there has to be someone as pioneer. We are realistic and practical. We will start from student clubs in universities, incorporate NGO ideas into their activities, to train students with social practices, independent learning and critical thinking. We are also looking for collaborations with people from higher level of platform, try to gain contact with foundations.

Brandon has recognized that for the majority of university students, university education or degree has become the institutionalized means to achieve their goals, in his words, to meet their materialistic desires. In his narratives, on one hand, he emphasized to gain knowledge through self-learning, critical thinking and traveling, in opposition to the institutionalized university education – emphasizing GPA through standardized exams, and he opposed utilitarianism in university education; on the other hand, he emphasized the ideal with spiritual, intellectual or cultural values over materialistic life goals. In general, he replaces structured

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<sup>30</sup> Translator note: tricycleman refers to a man riding tricycle to provide transportation service for tourists.

learning in university with a flexible and independent process of pursuing knowledge, and also replaces materialistic life goals with an ideal to enlighten people and even bring changes to political structures in China through practicing NGO ideas. However, when he started interacting with the social and political structures in China with a goal of changing them, he found himself have to practice within the structure by utilizing the existing rules and resources, so he incorporated materialistic goals into his ideal. In Brandon's practices of connecting reality and ideal, due to lack of economic capital and effective social capitals, he fully recognized the limitation of his rebellious agency, as well as the tremendous time and energy he had to invest in order to convert his intellectual type of cultural capital into social capital and economic capital for supporting his ideal. Essentially, on one hand, Brandon's major problem with academic qualification is its incompetence in representing the embodied state of cultural capital, in other words, the actual knowledge and ability, so he never actually rejected the importance of university education or degree; on the other hand, rather than totally reject materialistic goals, he considered gaining enough economic capital and living a decent life as an immediate goal and also necessary for achieving his long term ideal. Thus, it seems that his class origin and habitus constrains his capacity to completely reject and replace the dominant institutionalized means and goals. Rather than view him as a full practitioner of rebellious agency, I tend to consider him as reformist who modifies the meanings of socially accept means and goals, and uses existing rules and structures to make micro-changes, at least, at initial stage.

## **7.5 Gender Habitus**

Besides capitals and habitus, Bourdieu's concept of class also takes into account other stratifying factors, such as gender, race or ethnicity, place of residence, and age. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) considers them as "secondary" to the capitals directly affecting the fundamental

“material conditions of existence” (pp. 102-109). Bourdieu (1984) notices that certain occupations, such as medical and social services, are highly feminized, and even though from the same social class, males are more likely to study science and females more likely to study literature in French schools. Nevertheless, gender creates social divisions that occur within classes rather than cross-cut them. As Bourdieu (1984) specifies, “the volume and composition of capital give specific form and value to the determinations which the other factor (age, sex, place of residence, etc.) impose on practices” (p. 107). However, on one hand, Bourdieu defines gender as a secondary variable in this stratification framework; on the other hand, in other parts of his work, he refers the gender symbolism of the binary male/female opposition as a form of domination in all social hierarchies. It seems that there is no clear interaction between two views, but in an article published in 1990, Bourdieu speaks of a “gendered and gendering habitus”, and he uses the terms gender habitus and male habitus casually (Behnke & Meuser, 2001, p. 154-156). In an interview, Bourdieu states that gender is a fundamental dimension of the habitus, but at the same time he expresses doubt whether it makes sense to use the term gender habitus in the same way as the notion of class habitus, because he assumes that the socialization into a social class is most fundamental, even if it is deeply influenced by the gender-specific socialization (Behnke & Meuser, 2001). Therefore, he concludes that perhaps we do not have the instruments for drawing a clear distinction between gender and class habitus, “what we observe is that there are always societal and gendered constructed habitus” (Behnke & Meuser, 2001, p. 154-156). In general, it’s more certain that he acknowledges that gender can constitute an important source of social division to social class, even though he claims that gender is ultimately less capable than class in sustaining mobilized social actions.

In this study, I have no intention to present a fully developed theory regarding gender

habitus, instead I want to offer some theoretical reflections which arose in the process of data analysis. I find the concept of habitus can be applied to explain the gender differences emerging from interview data, so I decided to adopt Bourdieu's understanding of gender habitus and male domination to understand the discrimination female students have undergone from educational experience to job searching process.

I introduced Emma's story before. The gender structure in the community in which she was growing up is that the boys are automatically allocated more resources than girls in family, especially when the economic capital is in shortage. As a girl, Emma was able to gain resource from family to attend senior high school and university, only because her brothers had no access to that education due to his poor academic performance. Moreover, she also had to fight for equal treatment regarding educational opportunity from her parents. Having been treated unfairly in this family as a girl, Emma developed a disposition to emphasize pursuing self-independence in her life, which can be shown through her narratives about how she has difficulty in developing and maintaining intimacy with her friends and family members, and how her higher education weakens the tie between her and family members. However, when talking about plans in future, she took improving her family's socioeconomic status as her long term goal, and this responsibility she voluntarily took on is traditionally and socially considered as belonging to her brothers. In general, in a gender structure of male domination, Emma initially competed for resources and fought for equal treatment in family, and then, she tended to compete for equal recognition from her parents. Essentially, all her efforts seem to be against the gender role assigned by the structure in which she was born, and fight for equality between her and her brothers through competing for more resources and higher position outside family, to win recognition from her families and others in her community. However, sometimes, she also felt regret and

confused about her decision, because in the opposition of making the connection between her and her family stronger, her goal and efforts of helping entire family was actually weakening it, and she also received less recognition from her parents. That's the cost she had to pay for deviating from the gender habitus which are socially accepted by her family and others in her village. For resisting an intersectional effect of gender habitus and class habitus, Emma had to invest tremendous time and energy in accumulating cultural capital and converting them into economic capital, and also needed to bear the cost of losing intimate social connections with her lower SES family members.

Emma's narrative has little implication about gender differences in her postgraduate transition, as she has successfully entered graduate school, but the gender structure of male domination can be observed not only in family, but also in university and the labour market. In Lydia's job search process, she had been fully aware of the differential gender treatment in employer's recruitment. Both female and male students gain an awareness of gender discrimination in labour market. Sometimes it has been accepted as a common sense reality.

Lydia: ...I went to a job interview with my boyfriend, we went together, he got that job, to be a salesperson, but I didn't. Actually, I think that's unfair. More than 100 persons participated in the interview. They only recruited 10, only one is girl, and that girl is an athlete in university. They might think girls are not physically as strong as guys. It's true that it's even more difficult for girls to find job. If you go to a job fair, you can find many recruitment ads indicating that they prefer guys. As I know, even in English department, they have only 10 male students, large majority of them have found job, but the rest of 30 female students, only less than half of them have signed the contract by now.

YL: Do you think it's always been more difficult for girls than boys?

Lydia: well, it depends on what kind of job. Sometimes the chances are equal, but sometimes even though they said that the job is not exclusive for men or women, they are still more likely to recruit men. If a job requires travel, then they may not want a girl. Also, girls may want to work at a place close to home, or want to follow their boyfriends, so they may have to think more, and therefore miss more chances. Guys don't think much. Just like my boyfriend, he came back from that job interview, and told me that he decided to accept that job, that's too fast, that's a big surprise to me...since he has made the decision, I will try to find the job there [note: in the city where her boyfriend will work].



YL: Do you think it's easier for guys to find job than girls?

David: I do think so. Normally, the employer prefers to recruit someone very loyal to the company, because the company will be affected very much if you do job hopping. Majority of girls' destinations are to be with boyfriends, husband, or family members. When they get married, they will follow the guys, if the guy moves, she has to move and change job as well. Also, they will need maternity leave after she gets married, about one year,...many employers would consider that as a big issue, so they are not willing to recruit girls. You know what, actually studying social sciences or humanities are not that bad for girls, I know in some natural science disciplines, the male students who did poorly in exams can find better job than the female students who did very well in school.

Many studies point out that there is a gendered division of majors and occupations. For example, Bourdieu (1984) notes that certain occupations, such as medical and social services, are highly feminized, and even though from the same social class, males are more likely to study science and females more likely to study literature in French schools. Although I only did investigation on students studying social sciences and humanities in my study, I can still find gender differences in terms of their postgraduate transitions. Both Lydia and David have observed a phenomenon that female students in general face more difficulties and barriers in job search than male students, regardless what major they are in. The socially accepted gender habitus and male-dominated gender structure play important roles here. As pointed out by Lydia and David, women are stereotyped as too physically vulnerable to travel around. In addition, many employers believe that women's future is physically and emotionally attached to men, so they don't have a say on their career life, but have to follow their boyfriends or husbands, and they are also discriminated by employers due to potentiality of marriage and maternity. Although Lydia complained about the discrimination against female students in job interviews, she didn't show strong disagreement against the possible reasons behind that, on the contrary, she accepted the idea to follow her boyfriend regarding work location. By providing the reasons from employer's perspective, she actually took those difficulties and barriers for granted to some extent. In general, the gender structures of labour market restrict female students' opportunities

due to their gender habitus which are initially constructed by the larger social structure, in this way, the structures can ensure men's dominant position in two major fields of society, family and labour market.

Another interesting finding about gender differences is based on the typology of participants' agency. Among 20 male participants, I was able to identify 10 conformist cases, 6 semi-conformist cases, 2 ritualists, and 1 reformist, while among 20 female participants, 17 can be categorized as conformist agency, 2 as semi-conformists and 2 retreatist. A general trend rising from these numbers, that male students are less likely to apply conformist agency than female students, albeit some of them are conformist in action, they have tendency to reject the institutionalized means mentally but still accept the cultural goal. This finding can be explained by socially constructed gender habitus as well. The image, consciousness, and actions of women are socially constructed and accepted as obedient, less deviant, and less independent through different socialization processes including parenting and schooling. When facing new changes and challenges, compared to men, women are more likely to adopt the most socially accepted means and maintain original cultural goal.

## **7.6 Discussion and Summary**

By drawing upon Merton's typology as a basic tool to explore and examine individual agency, I am able to identify five major types of agency— 27 conformists, 8 semi-conformists, 2 ritualists, 2 retreatists, and 1 reformist – through interpretive analysis of participants' narratives, and provide in-depth analysis on representative cases for each type. Identifying types of agency in this study is not to develop a model to exhaust all the possible variations in agency, but to gain more systematic understanding of the variations in how individual agency interacting with structure in life transition process in terms of acquisition of and conversion between different

forms of capitals. Before looking into the variations, I need to emphasize again that all the participants are conformist before entering university, and holding a socially dominant idea that university education is indispensable for achieving a socially accepted goal – to maintain or achieve higher SES in society.

In this study, the types of individual agency are closely related to individual habitus resulting from the conditions of existence mainly pointing to family background. Firstly, by differentiating conformism in action and mentality, I identify conformist and semi-conformist agency. Coming from privileged family background, students are more capable of practicing conformist agency successfully, because they are not only provided with sufficient economic, social capital, and cultural capital through parental cultivation, but also internalized dispositions, such as high expectation of achievement, motivation to excel and strong sense of competition. The volume and structure of capitals they possess would help them occupy privileged position in the field of university and job market, so a smooth postgraduate transition is expected. If economic and social capital cannot be transferred directly from family, the conformist actor will have to invest more time and energy to accumulate cultural capital, reproduce and convert between different forms of capital, and they usually cannot occupy a privileged position when entering the field of university.

Sometimes, students who lack economic and social capitals transmitted directly from their family can be successful conformist by investing more time and energy in accumulating and reproducing capitals. Some students may become semi-conformist, and they are likely to obtain decent volume of economic and social capitals from family. However, the students from truly disadvantaged backgrounds, meaning inheriting very little economic, social, and initial cultural capitals from their family, would have much less chance to practice conformist or semi-

conformist agency through individual efforts. Based on the narratives of Emma, Cindy, Gary and Paul, the motive behind pursuing graduate education is mainly to invest more time and energy to reproduce more cultural capital and social capital, in order to achieve their goals of obtaining higher SES. Some students from low SES successfully got into graduate school with a precondition of receiving full funding due to their outstanding academic performance, and some failed to get funding but still continued trying next year. Having been told by parents, relatives, or teachers since young age, these students often hold a belief that studying hard will provide them to better future, in other words, the cultural capital they acquire through university education can be converted into economic capital and social status after they get the academic qualification. However, the devaluation of bachelor degrees in job market makes them realize the difficulties and barriers in such capital conversion. Actually, due to lack of instructions from parents who had no university education, many of disadvantaged students couldn't recognize this reality until they start facing post-graduate transition. In general, given their lack of economic capital, social capital, and initial accumulation of culture capital, prolonging school period through graduate program becomes a common strategy adopted by low SES conformist agency. However, without having a longitudinal study, I am not be able to examine whether or not they can accumulate the capitals which can help them meet their goals, but one thing can be sure that the less volume of capitals they initially possess, and the greater proportion of academic and intellectual type of cultural capitals they need to pursue, and the more time and energy they have to invest to convert them into economic capital, that is to say, the more difficult it is for them to achieve the socially accepted goal.

Although most students decided to maintain their conformist agency, a few students tend to give up when confronting all the difficulties and barriers in postgraduate transition, and they

became retreatist or ritualist. They are very likely from less-advantaged socioeconomic family backgrounds, but since there are only 4 cases of them, it is difficult to generalize the background variations.

Economic and social capital transferred from family can play the most effective role in postgraduate transition, but if without them, cultural capital cultivated through parenting can empower the students from less privileged family background. For example, Rebecca successfully achieved her postgraduate goal of finding a stable job with decent income. She considered herself from “poor” family, but she acquired intellectual type of cultural capital through reading and receiving advice from her grandpa and father. Her habitus of obedience and seeking recognition in performances, including academic performance, social activity and political status, has been cultivated in a family environment of teachers. The reformist Brandon is a special case among all the respondents. Coming from a family in rural area with very limited economic and social capital, Brandon inherited books and reading habit from his father and grandfather after they passed away. His father and grandfather were both the most knowledgeable person in the village but with no motivation to struggle for upward mobility. They provided him an atmosphere of reading, and his mother and younger brother provided him an open family environment of discussion and critique. The knowledge, reading habit and critical thinking he possessed actually empower him to practice a reformist agency which modifies and adjusts the meanings of cultural goal and institutional means to match up his own dispositions.

Finally, gender differences can be found in practicing strategic agency in postgraduate transition. Female students encounter even more barriers in postgraduate transition processes. The discrimination against female students can be found frequently in this newly established liberal job market in China. Being a woman and coming from a low SES family intensify the

vulnerable situation of female students in both education and job market. When the resources are severely limited, especially in rural area, boys are given privileged access to the resources. I also find that there are significantly more female than male students among the conformists, and 2 retreatists are both female students who have switched their life goal to becoming a good housewife. The gender stereotype and discriminations against women at both social and institutional level make low SES female students feel even more oppressed and vulnerable to actively pursue the cultural goal of higher SES and achievement in career.

## **Chapter VIII**

### **Summary, Conclusion, and Policy Implication**

When I started to develop my research topic for this thesis, I was very interested in youth's life transitions. I became aware of two heated topics regarding young people, especially the students in contemporary China. One concerns the issue of taking the National College Entrance Exam, which is officially the exclusive way to get into university, so getting a high grade on that exam is the number one mission for high school students; the other is about postgraduate employment among university graduates. When you ask high school or university students why they go to university, most of the time, you receive answers like, "I want to get a better job," "I want to have a better future". For students from rural area, their response might be "this is the only way for me to get out from village". In my study, 39 out of 40 respondents gave me similar answers, and the only alternative answer is that university provides opportunities to interact with more knowledgeable scholars. If you ask university students who are facing graduation whether or not it is difficult to find a job meeting their expectations, very likely you would hear "yes". All the respondents in my study thought it was difficult for new university graduates to find an ideal job. This disjunction between aspiration and actual outcome makes us wonder whether going to university is a rational decision only based on the calculation of payment and cost, or heavily influenced by other social forces like the dominant or normative ideology.

These two hot topics have drawn tremendous attention among the public and the policy makers in China and pointed to two major transitions in Chinese young students' life course, which are high school to university transition and postgraduate transition after university. These

two transitions have become widely concerned issues in contemporary China, because they not only have tremendous influence over Chinese youth's life path, but also involved two substantial social systems, higher education and labour market, under reform and restructuration in transforming modern China. Drawing on Schutz's concept of common sense life world as well as Bourdieu's theoretical framework of social practices with emphasis on his conception of the forms of capital, cultural capital, and habitus, my aim was to understand the dynamic interactions between structure and agency in the two transitions of Chinese students. Furthermore, by referring to Merton's typology of modes of individual adaptation, I attempted to construct a typology of strategic agency of Chinese students in perceiving and handling their important life transitional processes. By doing so, I addressed the gaps in empirical studies and theoretical approaches about youth's school-work transition. Empirically, there has been dearth of studies on how students perceive and react to the institutional and structural contexts in a society undergoing drastic and rapid social transformation like China. Theoretically, the dualist understanding of structure-agency has been critiqued as leading to an overemphasis on either concept, so it has been growing academic interest in exploring the interactions between structural-institutional factors and individual agency, but there has been little emphasis on revealing the potential patterns of how different individual agencies perceive and react to similar structural and institutional factors, and this study is aimed to fill this gap. I will begin this final chapter by briefly summarizing the central findings to answer the research questions of this study and presenting a comprehensive explanatory framework for these university students' postgraduate transition processes, and then I will discuss more details of its implications at both theoretical and policymaking level, finally, the limitations of this study will be mentioned, and some suggestions for future studies will be recommended.



## 8.1 Summary of Findings

### *8.1.1 The Historical, Structural, and Institutional Contexts of Post-1978 China*

My first research question asked about the structural, institutional, and cultural contexts in shaping higher education and labour market for university graduates in China. Firstly, it is almost impossible to ignore historical and cultural factors in the connections between examination-based education and socioeconomic status in China. Traditionally, the Confucius education and Imperial Examination systems had worked together to establish a widely accepted ideology in ancient China, that people was able to achieve higher socioeconomic status (become a government official as member of ruling class) through formal education and passing exams. The Imperial examination and Confucianism education were abolished in 1905, while later the restructuring of higher educational system based on the Soviet Union's model and the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE) were established along with the founding of the People's Republic of China. The socialist central government used the NCEE to select qualified students to receive higher education and adopted job assignment policy to guarantee postsecondary graduates superior social status and well-respected tenured job. The College entrance exam and job assignment policy were suspended during Cultural Revolution and restored in 1981. These two systems were in place to make sure that the elite students were selected to receive higher education and they would get jobs of privileged social status after they graduate. After reviewing the historical and cultural contexts of education and social mobility in China, I think it is not surprising to find that students and their parents in China widely hold the belief that university education leads to success or higher social status.

The problem of this common belief is how much it can reflect the social reality. As mentioned before, both educational system and labour market in China are in the process of restructuration and transformation, so new social forces are challenging this common belief which has been dominantly shaped by previous experience and ideology. Firstly, since China started building the market-oriented economy in early 1980s, and the labour market has become more and more liberal, the job assignment policy was eventually abandoned in 2000 in order to meet the need of liberal labour market. Secondly, in the past ten years, from 2001 to 2011, the population of post-secondary graduates increased 6 times from 1.1 million to 6.6 million, and the number of graduates who were unemployed after they graduated also increased about 6 times from 340,000 to about 2.1 million. That is to say, although the job market for post-secondary graduates has been growing along with the expansion of higher education in China, such growth has not been fast enough. The actual number of university graduates who have difficulties in finding job has been growing constantly and significantly every year and would be accumulated for years, so the unemployment of university graduates has become a severe social issue in China in recent years. The gap between the expectation of university students and their actual job searching experience has been more and more noticeable. For vast majority of university students, especially those from poor rural areas, university education is widely considered as the necessary and even sufficient condition for upward mobility. But when they start looking for jobs, they would notice that university education may be important or even necessary, but definitely not the sufficient condition for upward mobility.

Why is there such a big gap between students and their parents' expectation and actual situation? A primary reason is the institutional disjuncture between the education system and job market system in transforming China. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this study discusses a

process of two interrelated and continuous transitions, and all university students in China have experienced or will experience this process which involves the transition from high school to university and the transition from university to work. Some students may have another phase in this process by getting into graduate school, but they eventually will enter job market. In the first transition, the process is highly restricted and standardized by the central government. Firstly, all levels of educational institutions in China, from elementary school to university, are highly stratified. Schools are stratified into key-point school and non-key-point school in terms of the allocation of resources and the academic performance of the students in that school; the quality of teaching is mainly measured by students' exam grades and students are also evaluated and classified merely based on their exam grades. Secondly, the teaching and learning styles as well as curriculum are primarily designed based on the NCEE with clear and specified guidelines and regulations designed by the central government, the Ministry of Education in particular. Thirdly, the application and enrolment procedures are highly regulated at national level as well. For example, the number of institutions and majors to be applied are limited, the order of preference of institutions and majors has to be decided; major has to be determined before getting into university, and so on and so forth. On the contrary, the rigid institutional restrictions and controls can be rarely found in university students' postgraduate transition. However, such institutional disjuncture between the two transitions has only emerged in recent years. The graduate job assignment policy was in place to impose institutional restrictions on postgraduate transition of university students to confine their positions and jobs as well as guarantee their tenured employment. Since China started building the market-oriented economy and labour market becomes increasingly liberal, the graduate job assignment policy was generally abolished to meet the need of labour market. Presently, there are employment policies to assist the job searching

process, but there is few institutional restriction or control from the central government on the school-work transition of university students.

### ***8.1.2 Quantitative Patterns of University Participants***

My second research question asked who university participants are in China and how different they are in terms of socioeconomic background, gender, and their acquisition of social capital and cultural capital. The quantitative findings suggest that there is no significant domination of students with advantaged socioeconomic background in university participation, at least based on the situation in Xi'an Jiaotong University and Lanzhou University which are both considered as nationally prestigious university but are located in less-developed regions of China. Almost 70 percent of participants in the general survey were from households with annual income lower than the national average. The vast majority of them are first generation college student, which means neither of their parents ever received post-secondary education, but almost half of them reported as not the first in immediate family to attend university, as they have elder sibling(s) attending university before them. In this case, besides parental educational influence, we also want to pay attention to the peer educational influence on university participation. Moreover, half of the participants come from rural area, and more than half of the participants' parents are worker or peasant, and mothers are more likely to be worker or peasant than fathers. However, there are remarkably more male students than female students in both universities. Besides, the quantitative analysis shows that socioeconomic background has no significant impact on university students' academic performances. This finding suggests that once students are able to enter university, especially the key-point university, through taking the NCEE, their family background may have little direct impact on their actual academic performance. At the same time, I find that although socioeconomic background shows few significant associations

with students' postgraduate employment status, the socioeconomic background factors are strongly associated with students' university experience, and their university experience has significant influence over their postgraduate employment status. Besides socioeconomic background factors, gender also plays a very significant role. Compared to female students, male students are more likely to find a job before formal graduation.

To be more specific, students' important university experiences are categorized into different forms of capital based on Bourdieu's conceptualization of capital. I find the institutionalized form of cultural capital has a direct and significant impact on students' postgraduate employment status, such as dual-degree, major, certificates of English proficiency or other specific skills, as well as institutionalized forms of social capital, such as the Communist Party Membership, are positively related to their employment status. Even though all the institutionalized cultural capitals have direct and positive impacts on students' chances of finding jobs, among embodied form of cultural capitals, including inclination to work and inclination to participate in social activities, only their inclination to work associates with an increase of their chances in finding jobs. Through quantitative analysis, we must recognize that as institutionalized forms of cultural and social capital, the numbers and areas of focus for diplomas, certificates of skill, and CPC membership become substantially related to university graduates' postgraduate employment opportunities, and students' possession of these significant cultural and social capitals is affected by their socioeconomic background. Thus, I have a tentative conclusion that the background characteristics also play an important role in students' postgraduate employment through different forms of capital acquired and possessed by students, but this indirect connection is still subject to further analysis based on qualitative data. The quantitative analysis can provide general patterns on how institutionalized form of capitals play

roles in students' strategic agency in negotiating with the social and institutional structures and changes in postgraduate transition, but qualitative analysis is necessary to understand these dynamics in details, especially with respect to embodied form of cultural and social capitals, such as habitus, aptitudes, tastes, inclinations, and competencies, which are difficult to measure and interpret in quantitative analysis.

### ***8.1.3 Students' Perceptions of Social Institutions and Structures during Two Transitions***

Through qualitative analysis, I am able to answer my third research question, which is to explore how university students perceive and negotiate with the austere social and structural changes in higher education and labour market, and how the students from disadvantaged socioeconomic background interpret their own agency in their fulfillment of post-graduate goals in comparison with the students coming from well-off family. The qualitative analysis was based on interview data collected by myself. The special features of the interview participants are: 1) when they participated in this study, they were going to complete their university education within one month, and 2) they studied in social sciences or humanities.

As mentioned earlier, the institutional disjuncture between the education system and job market system as well as between the two transitions has become one of the primary causes of the increasing employment difficulties faced by university graduates. During and before the post-high school transition, Chinese students are always told by teachers, parents, and others, that if they want to find good job and have higher quality of life and social status, they must fight for higher exam grade and get into university. After 12 years investment of time and energy, they have learnt that the NCEE grade in particular is the single and ultimate criterion in competing for a better position in postsecondary education. All of interview participants were considered as

obtaining a relatively advantaged position after their transition from high school to university. However, about four years later, when they start experiencing school-to-work transition, they gradually notice that the rules in competing for a good position in the field of job market has changed significantly compare to what they were told during the first transition. Firstly, university degree does not guarantee an employment providing higher quality of life or socioeconomic status. Secondly, academic performance in university has become one of the less important criteria, and multiple criteria are used to select the winner in job market, including social network, work experience, personality, hands-on ability and specific skill, CPC membership, so on and so forth. Thirdly, employers especially in private sectors gain dominant power and considerable flexibility in recruiting university graduates. Due to the oversupply of university graduates in labour market and little public or governmental supervision over the recruitment process, employers are able to find more qualified workforce with less cost, and that largely increases the vulnerability of new university graduates.

These changes have tremendous impacts on all the university graduates and put many of them in anomic situation, especially those from disadvantaged family background. In my interviews, it is not rare to hear about the disappointment and confusion of university education expressed by students. Students like Paul who are from peasant family living in village described how much he was anxious for getting into university and felt full of expectation on his future when he started studying in university, and how much he felt frustrated and full of uncertainty after being rejected several times in job application with the degree he has, even though he has lowered his expectation on salary and is capable of doing those jobs. For the students from disadvantaged family background, university education was considered as the only way of being

empowered, but the feeling of empowerment through education has been severely weakened when they experience university-work transition.

In general, based on the descriptive analysis of participants' account of their decision to pursue university education and their postgraduate plans, as well as their perception of the ways in which institutional and social contexts may have shaped their transitional decisions and plans, we may conclude that students' individual agency has been largely constrained by institutional arrangements and social and economic structures. Despite all the institutional and structural barriers, some disadvantaged students were still able to struggle for a better position in their postgraduate transition. There are still many variations in students' practices and achievements of their postgraduate transition, even though they are from similar socioeconomic background.

#### ***8.1.4 Types of Agency, Forms of Capital and Habitus***

My fourth research question started to focus on student's own narratives of agency, given the obviously determining impact of institutional and structural factors. Facing the devaluation of university degree and the disjuncture between education system and job market system, students gradually recognize that university degree and grades in exams are neither the only nor the most important criteria in job searching process, intentionally or unintentionally, many of them start to define, pursue and utilize different forms of capital which may help them in achieving their postgraduate goals. Because the importance of academic qualification has been weakened largely in competing for a better position in job market for university graduates in China, other forms of capital become increasingly valuable for them. The interpretative analysis of participants' narratives allows me answer questions like how different forms of capital are produced, reproduced and converted in the fulfillment of participants' postgraduate plans, who are in advantaged position to access and utilize these capitals, and how class and gender habitus are



involved in the production and allocation of capitals and reproduction of social inequality in further.

I borrowed Merton's typology of modes of individual adaptation as a primary tool to develop a typology of agency based on the individual acceptance of cultural goal and institutional means. Merton's typology provides five categories: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion, and I modify Merton's model based on my analysis of students' narrative of agency. The modified typology is presented in Table 8.1.

<b>Table 8.1 Types of University Students' Agency in Postgraduate Transition</b>		
Type of Agency	Cultural Goals (Job indicating Higher SES)	Institutionalized means (University Education)
Conformism (27)	Accepted	Accepted
Semi-Conformism (8)	Accepted	Rejected (in mentality) Accepted (in action)
Ritualism (2)	Rejected	Accepted
Retreatism (2)	Rejected	Rejected
Reformism (1)	Modified	Modified

Firstly, all the participants were somewhat conformist before they got into university, since they all accepted the idea that university education is the institutional means leading to better quality of life and higher social status, under the influences of parents, teacher, relatives, other students, or other social factors. Despite all the difficulties and challenges they encountered during postgraduate transition, large majority of them still inclined to hold on their conformist

agency. Secondly, I was able to identify 5 types of agency based on interpretative analysis of their narratives, including 27 cases of conformist agency, 8 cases of semi-conformist agency which refer to rejecting university education as institutional means in mentality but failing to adopt other means and still pursuing socially accepted goals, 2 ritualists, 2 retreatists, and 1 reformist. Different types of agency present significant variations in their interactions with the common sense reality and the actual reality.

The reformist agency in this study is a very interesting case. According to Brandon's self-narrative, he stopped going to class but decided to spend most of his university time on reading in the library, traveling across China to make variety of friends and trying to find out what his "lifelong career" is. By the time I interviewed him, he had decided to be an NGO practitioner and worked with one of his friends on initiating and conducting NGO projects. Nowadays, the NGO sector is still very underdeveloped in China, and may not necessarily provide Brandon with a better quality of life and higher social status. Brandon cared little for formal education in university and criticized the idea that university education is the instrumental means to achieve better material life. At this point, I tended to consider him as a rebellious agency by using Merton's typology, but after reading throughout his narratives, I found that he still considered to pursue graduate study in a particular university sooner or later, and he clarified that his goal was not to get the degree but to have a chance to interact with more intellectuals which might help his lifelong career. More than that, he also claimed that NGO projects need funding, and NGO practitioners should live decent lives, so that they can earn more trust and confidence from the people they are helping. Thus, rather than totally rejecting the cultural goal and formal education, he developed and re-defined the ultimate purpose of the commonly accepted cultural goal of pursuing better quality of life and higher education as the institutionalized means through his

agency. According to him, pursuing education and better quality of life both serve as the means to achieve the ultimate goal of helping vulnerable and marginalized people through NGO practices. I would call this case reformist agency. Where did this agency originate from? Normally, obtaining and pursuing an ideal of helping disadvantaged others as “a responsible citizen of China” requires economic capital as a financial base and a considerable amount of cultural capital as intellectual preparation. However, Brandon has no base of economic capital, since he came from a very poor family in a rural area, but he inherited the legacy from his father and grandpa who were the most knowledgeable persons in his village. After they passed away, they left him many books, and he was living in a family atmosphere of reading, critically thinking and discussing with his mother and younger brother. Despite lack of economic capital and social capital from family, Brandon still managed to empower himself with habit of reading, learning, and critical thinking which can be considered as a type of embodied cultural capital.

It seems that Brandon is an example of how an individual agent can make independent decisions about his life path through accumulating cultural capital, social capital, and economic capital by using his own agency. However, this special case cannot eliminate the strong linkage between advantaged socioeconomic background and accumulation and accessibility of different types of capitals. On one hand, his reformist agency mainly developed from his accumulation of cultural capital which was originally cultivated through his family; on the other hand, I do find that it is much easier for students from advantaged socioeconomic background to practice conformist and semi-conformist agency. They have direct access to economic capital, social capitals and cultural capitals which benefit their job searching process, but for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, they have to invest considerable amount of time and energy to convert between different types of capitals, to get capitals which can help them find the job

which meets their expectation. It is not rare to hear from the students that some students can easily find a job through their parents' networks, and it is not difficult to discover that the students coming from families with no such networks have to spend time and energy to build their own social networks which may or may not help them in finding jobs. It is the same dynamic in terms of possessing cultural capital. When a student possesses leadership skill, sophisticated communication skill, motivation to learn more knowledge, higher level of English proficiency, consciousness of competition, so on and so forth, their parents often have postsecondary education, higher income and social status. At meanwhile, the students with disadvantaged socioeconomic background may not be able to recognize the importance of social and cultural capitals until they started looking for jobs, and minority of them who notice that earlier have to work really hard on accumulating and converting different types of capitals during 4 years of university, due to lack of resource and habitus acquired through privileged family background. Eventually, some tend to give up upon the cultural goal and stop caring about university education, becoming retreatist, and some incline to think little of the cultural goal which is too difficult to achieve, so start isolating themselves into a pure reading and studying mentality which is a habitus cultivated by a common sense lifeworld that learning naturally leads to better material life, and become a ritualist. In general, it is relatively easy for more privileged students to practice conformist and semi-conformist agency successfully, but not for the students from disadvantaged socioeconomic background. While majority of them decide to stay as conformist through constant investment of time and energy in producing different types of capitals, those who failed to be conformist are very likely to start practicing retreatist or ritualist agency.

It is also interesting to find gender differences in the typology of agency. Female students

are more likely to be conformist agency compared to male students, while male students are more likely to be the semi-conformist than female students, and the 2 ritualists were male, 2 retreatist were female, and 1 reformist was male. A general trend rising from these numbers is that male students are less likely to apply conformist agency than female students, albeit some of them are conformist in action, they have tendency to reject the institutionalized means mentally but still accept the cultural goal. This finding can be explained by socially constructed gender habitus. The image, consciousness, and actions of women are socially constructed and accepted as obedient, less deviant or rebellious through different socialization processes including parenting and schooling. When facing new changes and challenges, compare to men, women may be more likely to adopt the most socially accepted means and maintain original cultural goal. It is important to recognize the variations in people's agencies and what kinds of factors may cause these variations, but I also feel necessary to explore the extent to which the students tend to consider that they have independent agency in making choice and taking actions and how to interpret their perceptions. Most university students have recognized that their agencies have been largely constrained by social and economic factors and situation. During their first transition from high school to university, vast majority of them believe that all the external and internal forces they are facing have driven them to pursue higher education, from parents, relatives, neighbors, teachers, classmates, to mass media, the only two factors inhibiting young people from doing that are lack of financial support and poor academic performance. some students attempted to challenge the common sense that university is only path for them to gain better quality of life and higher social status, and tried to adopt the other way, but eventually they gave up due to parental pressure. When they started experiencing post-university transition, they all recognized the absence of institutional restrictions from government, but their decision

making process has been highly affected by the dramatic changes in social and economic structures in China. Rather than having clearer ideas of their post-university options and plans, most of them find themselves have to search for answers by constantly clashing social and structural barriers and boundaries which they cannot override, and a small number of them are able to be informed or empowered by their family directly or indirectly. The semi-conformist, retreatist, and ritualist students all expressed a strong feeling of lack of independent agency or highly constrained agency when facing postgraduate transition, and they respond to it differently in terms of the quantity and composition of the capitals they possess, their class habitus and gender habitus. Some conformists and the reformist did express their feeling of having relatively strong independent agency.

For example, even though Lisa attempted to demonstrate her autonomous agency in making decision on both post-high-school and post-university plans by emphasizing her refusal of parents' assistance to provide better opportunities and more financial support, her career goal of being a government official, competitive personality, and talents in piano and different kinds of sports have shown the legacy she acquired from her privileged family. Emma and Brandon are two cases indicating upward mobility. In her narrative, Emma emphasized that she made her decision alone, and revealed how difficult it was to pursue education when she had to resist her parents' pressure and social norm in her village. She is categorized as conformist agency by a typology built based on a common sense of cultural goal and institutionalized means in larger society, but in her family and community, she was not considered as conforming at all. In order to be the conformist in larger society, besides the financial difficulty, Emma had to fight against the gender role and stereotype assigned on her by parents and relatives in her village, which is to give up opportunity of receiving higher education to her brother due to lack of money, and start

making money for family before getting married. After paying all these efforts to pursue better life with a cost of getting estranged with her family, she still felt concerned and uncertain about her post-university employment, so she decided to get more education to increase the certainty of better life in future. Her concern and uncertainty about future as well as her expectation to improve her relationship with lower class family by promising them financial support in future were all evidences of a class habitus that clashed with the common sense lifeworld she was conforming to, and also significantly affected her agency in struggling for upward mobility. In Brandon's case, his reformist agency was initially enabled by the influences from his family members and reading, and that might help him develop a disposition of standing up for the vulnerable people and fairness. This disposition had motivated him to fight against the corruption committed by a local government authority, but his action in pursuing university education had been highly constrained by family's financial situation and oppressed by the local authority due to his previous protest. In general, his family background, dispositions and experiences all contributed in shaping his reformist agency. Due to his disadvantaged family background and an intention of struggling for recognized and respectable social and economic status, even though he claimed that he "had rebellious mentality", and his "ultimate goal is to help the vulnerable and disadvantaged people", his class habitus prevented him from rejecting the cultural goal and institutional means entirely. Both Brandon and Emma shared some commonalities which make them appear as possessing certain level of autonomous agency. Their self-perceived autonomous agency was mainly originated from three sources: habitus of reading and learning, strong feeling of being oppressed, recognition of one way or one opportunity which may assist them resist such oppression, usually education. Thus, we can conclude that there should not be any doubt that education is an extremely important way to enlighten and empower people who are in

disadvantaged positions, but the question is what kind of education can perform such function. This question may inspire us some policy implications based on the findings of this study.

## **8.2 Theoretical Implications: An Integrated Analytical Framework for Students' Life Transition Processes**

Before the general framework is presented, I would like to give a brief summary of how different theoretical approaches are effectively incorporated in this study to explain Chinese university students' educational and postgraduate transitions. Based on Bourdieu's model, the higher education system and labour market in any given country can be considered as fields, as they both are composed of objective structures and relations and endowed with their own rules, regularities, and forms of authority (Bourdieu, 1993a). It would be interesting to explore the interactions among the three properties of the field of higher education and labour markets in China's transformation process. Under a socialist education system, both the education system and labour markets were highly controlled by the central government which imposed admission quotas and stipulated uniform regulations for each step of the admission procedures. Despite the establishment of the NCEE, class origin and political commitment to communist revolution had a strong influence over higher education admission, and these two criterion became determinant during the cultural revolution from 1966 to 1976. The graduate assignment policy adopted from 1951 to the late 1990s determined new graduate's position in labour market based on the type and level of education they had received. Therefore, one's position in the field of education can determine their position when they first enter the field of labour market. In general, the positions in both fields were highly restricted and structured based on several criteria of evaluation (including class origin, political commitment, and educational performance), and there were little room for mobility within each field or between, consequently, both fields of higher education



and labour market were lack of battlefield characteristics and had low level of autonomy from each other since the central government – a political field – could easily intrude and control both fields, and purposefully established immediate and strong connection between the two fields. Starting from the early 1980s, China launched a new policy of economic reforms with a goal of achieving modernization in China. The economic reforms promote an economic transition from planned economy under state control to market-oriented economy. During this transition process, the labour market has been much less regulated, or we shall say, highly embraced free market principles, compared to the pre-reform socialist China. Applying Bourdieu's conceptualization of field, the impact of the forcefield in the educational system provides little room for internal mobility except for through examination grades. Examinations, especially the NCEE, have become the single predominant criterion of evaluation in this field. While the intrusive power from the political field has been weakening slightly along with decreasing financial supports from the central government, political regulation is still dominant. However, on the other hand, when they are about to enter labour market, they are more likely to be facing a battlefield in which the rules and regulations are in making. After the job assignment system was retracted in 2000, the political intrusion to the field of labour market has almost been eliminated, the original distribution of capitals has been overturned, and the new graduates have to collect and utilize different types of capital to compete for a better position in labour market. Even though there have been multiple recognized criteria, such as inherited social networks, ability to build social networks, educational credentials, specialized skills, social skills, and so on, it is still very unclear that which capital(s) or criteria weigh the most in the field of labour market under tremendous restructuration. In general, Bourdieu's field analysis has provided a very effective

framework for describing and analyzing the dramatic changes of social contexts in which Chinese students have to adjust to for making post-graduate transition.

A transition from one field with dominant features characterized by a forcefield to another field with dominant features as a battlefield can generate tremendous challenges to which individual agents must adapt. According to Schutz and Bourdieu, when individuals have to cope with problematic circumstances, they may develop certain level of rational and strategic agency. According to Schutz, everyday actors are normally living in a lifeworld which is the taken-for-granted common sense reality of social life, and they tend to take actions and make choices based on a “stock of knowledge” which all “fellow men” commonly understand. Thus, when the common sense reality is highly incompatible with the situation, and a person’s stock of knowledge at hand cannot adequately be applied to interpret this situation, one must improvise by practising certain level of rationality. However, even improvisation is restricted to the person’s imaginative opportunities which are grounded in the stock of knowledge at hand. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus also emphasizes the structural restrictions for actions originated from person’s early socialization experiences, and he acknowledges the existence of rationality in situations of crisis which disrupt the immediate adjustment of habitus to field. In general, it is more feasible to adopt Schutz’s common sense lifeworld to interpret a social life and dominant ideology sedimented historically beyond an individual’s socialization, while it is critical to draw upon Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to interpret the divergent responses to one problematic or crisis situation between individuals. In this study, a common sense reality can be recognized based on a review of historical and modern development of education system and social mobility mechanism in China, as well as the narratives of the respondents in this study. For the target population in this study, this common sense reality is that education is the pathway to upward

social mobility, to be more specific, higher socioeconomic status. For large majority of the university students, this common sense reality may not be interrupted until they reach the life stage of post-graduate transitions in which they are facing the devaluation of university credentials, a high unemployment rate among new university graduates, and the increasing dissatisfaction with their positions in labour market. Combining Schutz and Bourdieu's discussion, this transition can be considered as an crisis situation requiring individual transitions between two interconnected fields under dramatic transformation and with very inconsistent criteria of evaluation.

The interruption of the common sense lifeworld indicates a disjuncture between a “culturally prescribed aspiration” of a society – higher socioeconomic status— and a “socially structured avenue” for realizing this aspiration – education, which is perceived as a derivative force of anomie by Merton (Merton, 1938). In order to deal with this anomic situation, individual agents may adopt different strategies to adapt to the imbalance between the cultural goal and institutional means, thus Merton's typology of individual adaptations has been drawn upon to analyze the divergent responses among Chinese university students, and five types of adaptive response can be identified, which are conformity, semi-conformity, ritualism, retreatism, and reformism. Furthermore, Bourdieu's conception of habitus and capital are used to interpret the social and structural reasons behind the different agentic responses. Combining the typological analysis and analysis of habitus and capitals, eventually, I find that conformity has been the default type of these university students, and majority of them still attempt to hold on this default despite of tremendous obstacles. Semi-conformity is not difficult to find. Failure to practice these two types of agency may result in retreatist or ritualist agency. Although I have not been able to identify the most important criteria of evaluation in the field of job market in China, it is

impossible for me to ignore a trend, that is the increasingly importance of social capital and cultural capital for the accessibility and mobility in the labour market, which will have tremendous impacts on the social mobility mechanism, and the production and reproduction process of social inequality and stratification in China. However, although the dominant pattern of interactions between structures and agency shows a reproductive process of social inequality, the existence of reformist agency may inspire a reflexive agency of self-empowerment under the constraint of structures and suggest an empowerment-oriented educational reform in transforming China.

In general, this study is able to present an integrated analytical framework to explain individual choice making and practice during their life transition process. Firstly, Bourdieu's field analysis can be used to examine whether this transition involves a process moving from one field to another field or a structural or institutional shift within a field, by defining the rules, regulations, criteria of evaluation, positional relationships, and level of autonomy of the social contexts before and after transition. Secondly, the analysis can help to identify individuals' aspirations and the means to achieve these aspirations through this transition, and to find out and analyze the existence of common or dominant consciousness and practice regarding goal-means connections among the group of people who experience the same transition, by using Schutz's discussion of common sense lifeworld. Thirdly, the analysis can reveal the existence of disjunctions between the commonly accepted goal and means from individuals' actual practices, and using Merton's typological tool to explore the variations in individuals' responses to the disjunctions and identify different types of strategic agency. Fourthly, Bourdieu's conception of habitus and types of capital can be used to explain the social and structural reasons behind the diversity of agentic responses in their transition process. This framework can provide an in-depth

explanation of individual actors' decision making and practices in their life transition process, and more importantly, it presents an integrative approach to analyze the complex interactions between individual agency and social structures as well as the dynamics of institutional changes at different social scales, and to understand how individual life transitions would be affected by micro- and macro-social changes and how structures might be produced or reproduced from the dynamics and variations in life transition processes. This analytical framework is expected to be examined in other life transition studies.

### **8.3 Social Structural and Policy Implications**

In the introduction to this thesis, I referred to a recent boycott against the National College Entrance Exam conducted by 45 students studying in a pre-enrollment program in the South University of Science and Technology of China. This is only one of many cases reflecting the severe problems in China's contemporary educational system as well as its urgent needs for reform. As discussed in the introduction section, the incidents and requests for reform in education have attracted tremendous attention and triggered heated discussion and debates among students, parents, educational professionals, and policymakers in China. At the center of these discussions and debates are three major issues, which are the institutional disjuncture between the education system and labour market, the imbalance between decentralization and de-standardization of the education system and equity and equality in educational opportunity, as well as the relationships between the increasing socioeconomic inequality and the limited and ambiguous social upward mobility mechanism in transforming China.

Firstly, the findings of this study can engage these issues from university students' perspectives. One of the major findings in this study is the five types of responses to the disjunctions between education and labour market as well as the imbalance between a cultural

goal – upward mobility – and an institutional means – university education. Each type of response has different implications for policy making and social stability or change in China. It is not surprising to find that despite all the challenges and difficulties in finding a good job, majority of university students in my study still practice a conformist or semi-conformist agency. Their achievement can be considered as a maintaining force for the existing institutional and structural arrangements, and it has been found that the advantaged socioeconomic background can encourage the conformist agency, but the less advantaged or disadvantaged socioeconomic background would constrain the conformist agency. The reason to differentiate conformist and semi-conformist agency is that for all the respondents in my study, university education alone has not been the determinant or most important pathway for upward mobility, but the students from advantaged families have access to diversified alternatives than those from disadvantaged families, so for the advantaged conformist agency, education is the preferred one among several available options, and for the advantaged semi-conformist agency with other options, university credential is more like an accessory required by social norms, and that is why all the students with semi-conformist agency came from upper or middle class families. However, for the disadvantaged conformist agency with no choice to make, university education is the only potential pathway to achieve upward mobility. In general, there is no doubt that the current institutional and structural arrangements in higher education and labour market are predominantly benefiting the students from socioeconomically advantaged families, and according to this study, they have not been the majority of student population in public universities. The dissatisfaction of the majority would be able to facilitate potential systematic changes.

The disjunction between cultural goal and institutional means also triggered the emergence of retreatist, ritualist, and reformist agency. The students adopting these three types of agency are the minority in this study, and they all came from disadvantaged families and had strong critique or rejection to the dominant cultural goal or/and the institutional means, and such rejection and critique have reflected in their social practices. The retreatist and ritualist agencies both respond to the anomie situation passively. If getting into university can be considered as a temporary upward mobility in relation to their original socioeconomic background, both the retreatist and ritualist may experience downward mobility, but only the ritualist would hold on to an educational lifestyle as long as their material life can be supported. Due to the limitation of my research sample, I could not find out the extent of the existence of retreatist and ritualist agency among Chinese university students. However, based on secondary feedback from some respondents in this study, it is not a rare phenomenon that students may employ retreatist or ritualist strategies to respond to the growing frustration with the difficulties in finding decent jobs with their university credentials, for example, by considering university as a venue to meet a future partner or someone to be financially relied on in the future. Some completely give up on the predominant cultural goal and decide to take jobs with low socioeconomic status, some isolate themselves in virtual world (e.g. Internet, video games) to avoid facing the difficulties in achieving the cultural goal in reality, and some use education to avoid the transition to work as much as possible. The cases of retreatism and ritualism indicate the failure of current university education as an effective knowledge transfer mechanism and a social upward mobility mechanism. Although only the students who were specialized in humanities and social sciences were recruited for interview study, and I cannot deny that the students studying in some other disciplines (e.g. engineering, computer sciences) may have different experiences in their

postgraduate transitions depending on the demand of labour market, however, it is arguable that lack of market orientation is the ultimate reason for the failure of higher education.

The reformist agency identified in this study embodies a process of self-empowerment to resist social and economic marginalization and oppression. This empowerment includes a process of exploring and reconstructing the connotation of education and material goals as well as accumulating social, cultural, and economic capitals which can benefit his ultimate goal. Despite all the critiques on the mainstream understanding of socioeconomic benefit as cultural goal and education as institutional means, this reformist student believes that his goal and means must not be contradictory to the dominant one, and they can be consistent at certain level. Although still highly constrained by the institutions and his socioeconomic background, with a strong desire of self-empowerment, his agency did expand the scale of choices in his life. The alternative he adopted was constrained by social structures but created by his reformist agency. Actually, such a desire of self-empowerment can also be found in a conformist student, Emma, which was derived from a strong resistance against gender oppression in her home village and socioeconomic marginalization in general, and that was acknowledged through education in school. She is a conformist when the common sense reality refers high socioeconomic status as the cultural goal and education as the institutional means, but in the social context of her village which denies girls' rights to pursue education and higher socioeconomic status when resources are in shortage, her choice of pursuing higher education made her a rebel. Her rebellious agency at that time enabled her conformist agency after getting into university and provided her possibility of upward mobility. These two very different cases both indicate that the rebellious/reformist agency can be enabled even under the severe restrictions of socioeconomic context, as long as the individuals have access to sufficient information and knowledge which



can provoke their desire of empowerment. The more this type of agency can be enabled, the more likely the disadvantaged can be empowered and bring positive impact on social equality. To empower the depowered and marginalized should be one of the key functions of public education.

In general, it can be demonstrated that the accessibility of students from less advantaged families to upward mobility mechanism has been increasingly restricted in the existing institutional and structural arrangements of higher education and labour market. An increasing level of socioeconomic inequality can be found among the university graduates, and it seems that socioeconomic inequality can be reproduced regardless of the accessibility of education. Policy changes and institutional reform are desperately needed to establish and regulate the upward mobility mechanism, and empower young students with diversified alternatives, sufficient information to make decisions and knowledge to acknowledge the constraints on their agency and practice rational agency to its maximum level. The effects of institutional reforms and policy changes in education and labour market in the transforming era will determine the social structures, level of social inequality, and social stability in future China. In addition to exploring the policy and social structural implications from the study results, it is also important to discuss how these implications can be related to the existing specific policies in China. Since the NCEE has been a significant embodiment of standardization and centralization in China's education system which imposes tremendous restrictions on how and what students are studying and thinking and alienates them from actual requirements in the current job market, there has been for several years considerably outcry to advocate abolishing the NCEE. However, for the young students from disadvantaged family backgrounds, this standardized NCEE is still considered as the most effective way and relatively equal opportunity to compete with the students from better

family backgrounds, at least during the post-high-school transition. Based on the findings, we know that the social capital, cultural capital and class habitus which were obtained through family play more important roles in job searching process than academic performance, and that is used to be the fundamental criterion for making the post-high-school transition. If this single fundamental criterion is abolished and replaced by the multiple criteria similar as the ones practiced during the university-work transition, the students from families which cannot cultivate or provide these types of capitals and habitus would be in much more vulnerable position, compared with those from advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus, disadvantaged students' chance of getting into high school and university may be even smaller, and their pursuit of upward mobility may be inhibited even much more.

Therefore, although the necessity of changing the structure of the examination system has been well recognized by academics and policymakers, rather than abolish the most effective existing mechanism for upward mobility, changing the curriculum is considered as one of the priorities. In recent years, the central government promoted a shift from examination-oriented education to essential-qualities-oriented education (Suzhi Jiaoyu), along with curriculum restructuring and textbook compilation. This essential-qualities-oriented education stresses the cultivation of competent personality and moral integrity, and emphasizes the development of creativity of the mind and hands-on ability. Ideally, the new textbook and curriculum would require students to obtain theoretical and practical knowledge in various subjects including natural and social sciences, humanities, and arts, and to develop a combination of cognitive skills, technical skills, social skills, leadership skills, so on and so forth. This type of education is promoted to meet the multiple and flexible requirements and liberal condition in job market. However, again, the socioeconomically disadvantaged students would fall behind in this type of

education, especially those living in rural areas where facilities and teachers are not available for providing this type of education. For example, based on the information presented in the interviews, presently, employers put so much emphasis on English communication and computer skill, while many English teachers in rural area may be able to help students deal with the exams but they can only speak very basic English, and many students from rural areas never touched a computer before they got into university or college. The rural teachers and students may know more agriculture-related knowledge and hands-on skills in the field, but that wouldn't help them be competent in formal education and get jobs which are considered as higher socioeconomic status. Thus, narrowing the gap between rural and urban education and gradually eliminating the streaming of primary and secondary educational institutions are the necessary initial steps of educational reform in China with a goal of alleviating social inequality. In order to enhance the teaching quality in the educational institutions which are ranked low in China's school hierarchy system and to have facilities and teachers providing better quality of teaching and work toward essential-qualities-oriented education, relevant teacher training programs and government financial support are needed.

Regarding policy suggestions on students' university-work transition, I think an essential-qualities-oriented educational programs may be more needed in postsecondary education presently. Rather than help maintaining the illusion of university degree naturally leading to good job and higher social status, postsecondary institutions are responsible for providing formal and accessible information and resources to help postsecondary students recognize the situation and accumulate important capitals for postgraduate transition as early as possible, and this is especially important for the students whose family members lack ability to help them out or inform them of the potential social and structural challenges in university-work transition.

Besides, after the rescission of postgraduate assignment system, despite the availability of some programs in facilitating postgraduate employment which are widely considered as lack of effectiveness, new regulations to reflect the need of current situation, especially the interests of new graduates, still have not been well established. I believe it is the time for the government to step-in and impose more effective regulations on employers in recruitment and employment process, to eliminate the gender discrimination, discrimination against rural residential status, and unfairness in contracts.

Most importantly, two vital issues should be addressed during institutional reforms in China: one is to establish effective and equitable mechanisms of social upward mobility for young generations, and the other is to reconstruct the primary functions and goals of public education in a liberal market-oriented economic context. Based on the findings of this study, to make public education an effective and equitable mechanism for social upward mobility and social equality, in addition to the equalization of educational opportunity and quality of education, an empowerment-oriented education is needed. Rather than attempt to indoctrinate poor students with the habitus and cultural capitals which rich students can inherit from their families at a very superficial level, the formal education should provide students knowledge and ability to acknowledge their own agency and the socioeconomic and structural constraints on it, to explore any types of capital they can potentially access and accumulate, to prepare for diversified alternatives for upward mobility, and to be sufficiently informed when making decisions for their life transitions.

#### **8.4 Limitations of Current Study and Suggestions for Future Research**

Several limitations of this study can be recognized during the analysis process, especially regarding the target population. Due to the limitation of time, this study only selected two key-point universities in China. It may control the influence of academic achievement before university, but at same time exclude the student population who are in non-key-point universities and colleges. Since the respondents in this study reported tremendous difficulties in making their postgraduate transition successfully, I have reason to believe that less-advantaged credentials from non-key-universities may experience even more restrictions and challenges in making such transition. Besides, some respondents reported that a collegial degree may not necessarily be less useful than a university degree, but such difference cannot be examined in this study. In addition, only the students who were specialized in humanities and social sciences were recruited for interview investigation, and I cannot deny that students studying in other disciplines may have different experiences in their postgraduate transitions depending on the demand of labour market. However, on one hand, focusing on a less heterogeneous student group can help me identify and exhaust the influential factors and reduce potential variations to a manageable level; but, on the other hand, it reduces the generalizability of the findings from this study. The common sense reality presented in this study was generated based on respondents' narratives during interview and a brief review of the development of education system and social mobility mechanism in ancient and modern China. However, this may not be the common sense reality for the people who never consider education as the only pathway for upward mobility. Also, I only investigated the youth population who has access to higher education and only composes a small percentage of youth population in China, thus, the conclusions in this study may not be able to explain the school-to-work transitions among the students who only complete 9 years of compulsory

education or graduated from secondary educational institutions, such as junior or senior specialized high schools and normal junior or senior high schools. Nevertheless, the findings and integrated analytical model in this thesis can be further examined in future studies which may focus on other Chinese student groups or the student groups in other countries in their life transition processes, especially those with marginalized and disadvantaged backgrounds.

At theoretical level, it has always been considered as challenging for researchers applying Western theories into a non-Western context. Essentially, social theories are the tools to facilitate understanding of social problems and phenomenon. This study is able to generate its own theoretical framework based on empirical findings in China, and at the same time, not single but multiple existing social theories which were developed in the Western context are able to provide useful and complementary explanations for Chinese university students' major life transitional experiences in a context of dramatic social change. This theoretical framework not only examines the applicability of the theories and some concepts from Schutz, Bourdieu, and Merton, but also provides an example of generating new knowledge from well-established knowledge through introducing new empirical data in different social contexts.

In this study, my main goal was to explore how the changing structural factors in a transforming society would affect young people's decisions on life transitions, to interpret their individual understanding of those structural factors, and to explore the variations in the kinds of agency undertaken through students' reactions to and actions on challenges caused by social changes and structural factors. Their agency can be implicated in the phenomenon of upward mobility or the reproduction of social inequality. Despite the many research findings presented above, I believe there are still factors and interactions between agency and structures that remain unaddressed. The typology of agency used in this study highlights how actors interact with a

common sense lifeworld consisting of a societal goal and institutionalized means. The variations emerge from different responses and results of interactions. For example, rather than face one societal goal and one institutionalized means, people from the social class or social group which is very different from the university students in this study may have multiple goals and means, and that would change their interactions with the social structures substantially. In general, when applying this typology into analysis, it is necessary to define a particular socially embraced goal and the socially approved means, so this typology can be limited in interpreting agencies which interact with a common sense lifeworld with no clear means-goal structure or multiple means-goal structures.

At a methodological level, due to the intense schedule and limited budget for this project, I have employed secondary data for my quantitative analysis. Even though it is a highly relevant dataset for my study, and it is good enough for me to obtain a general understanding of the backgrounds, experiences and postgraduate aspirations of the students in Xi'an Jiaotong University and Lanzhou University, some important variables were not included in their data collection process, for example, except for job searching, no relevant survey question deals with the achievement of other postgraduate aspirations such as getting into graduate study; also, the research population of secondary data was all the students studying in both universities during the survey period, including undergraduate and graduate students at different years, that largely reduced the sample size of undergraduate students in their graduation year who are the student group I focus on in this study. Therefore, a follow-up study with a larger survey of university students in their graduation year would be very helpful. To overcome the limitations in quantitative analysis and gain more in-depth understanding of students' strategic agency, I collected interview data by myself. The qualitative analysis in this study relied exclusively on

students' perceptions and experiences in the process of high school to university transition and post-university transition. I may get a more comprehensive understanding of how students' agency interacts with the structures if I am able to conduct a follow-up study to include interviews with students' parents, siblings, teachers, and friends, because based on my interviews with students, all these people have more or less impact on their decision making process during the two transitions. It would be interesting and important to find out if their narratives would support or contradict those of the students.

Both the general survey and interviews were conducted during June and July when the university students in their graduation year were close to finishing or had already finished their programs, so that some of them had already known if their postgraduate goals have been achieved. However, many students were still in the process of looking for jobs or pursuing other postgraduate goals, so their post-university transitions had not yet been completed. Thus, a longitudinal study would be needed to follow up the actual achievements of those students, and also to investigate how individuals' perceptions of the interactions between their agency and structures changes over time and to explore the possible conversion among different types of agency as well as the social contexts of that in their life course trajectory.

This study has been especially focused on the students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, but it is also important to acknowledge significant gender differences among students in terms of educational experiences and dispositions in transitions. The general survey shows a significantly higher proportion of male compared to female student participants from both universities, but my interviews were conducted with equal numbers of male and female participants, so it is possible that some important gender differences cannot be discovered or elaborated by the analysis of interview data. Based on quantitative analysis and



students' narratives, I have acknowledged that female students in general are in a disadvantaged position in the job search process, and female students from rural areas have smaller chances to pursue higher education, so they often find themselves in a situation in which they are double-disadvantaged. However, the information related to female students in particular is not sufficient to allow for more in-depth analysis. Therefore, future studies are needed to focus on the special disadvantages and barriers young women are facing and responding in their life transition processes in addition to the challenges caused by social structural changes in transforming China, and female students from rural areas deserve even more academic and public attention due to their double-disadvantaged status.

It seems that contemporary China is in a process of social transformation toward uncertainty. It is worth noting that China has a long history of prevailing ideology of upward mobility through education and meritocracy, so that the social structure and judgement on the value of different occupations and academic qualifications have been formed and embedded in Chinese people's mind for centuries, becoming a cultural habitus widely affecting Chinese people, even if they have moved into other social and cultural contexts. Many studies have found that a significant difference in overseas Chinese parenting compared to many other ethnic origins is that Chinese parents hold a strong belief that education leads to higher socioeconomic status and place a high degree of emphasis on and involvement in children's academic performance (Chao, 1995, 1996; Li, 2010). This finding is also applied to the immigrants from other Asian countries which were historically influenced by Confucius values and ideology (Goyette & Xie, 1999). Despite a minor interruption of Mao's promotion of privileging workers and peasants during his socialist proletarian revolution period for a few decades, the dominant ideology has existed for centuries with relatively superficial changes to accommodate social transformation,

and remains in contemporary China. However, in reality, the growing frustration with the inability of education to guarantee good employment can be observed. Thus, for future projects, it would be important to investigate how different social groups, classes or strata perceive and respond to this dominant ideology when it is highly inconsistent with the social reality, and how the responses from different social groups may affect the social structure and social stratification in China as a whole. Also, I believe that through investigating the diversified agentic practices in responding to the changes in social mobility mechanism as well as the dominant ideology supporting the existing one, we may be able to discover the ultimate way to empower people who are in disadvantaged and vulnerable positions. That's why I am pleased to discover the existence of reformist agency in my study, which provides an example of realistic empowerment for disadvantaged people. Once an increasing number of people recognize and utilize the way to empower themselves to challenge the dominant ideology, there may be an opportunity to form social forces to challenge or change the existing structures and ideology which produce and reproduce social inequality.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Guide**

1. Why did you choose to pursue university education? Was it a hard decision to make?
2. Have you encountered any difficulties in order to attend university? If so, what are they?
3. How did you overcome these difficulties? What kinds of resources (personal, financial, social, other) did you use? What make you decide to participate in university?
4. How do you perceive the efforts made by you and your parents in your ability to enter university?
5. What major or field do you study in? Is it the major you are most interested in? Why did you choose this major? Do you have a minor or secondary field of study? (If so, what is it and why did you select this?)
6. How do you feel about the course load in university? How many hours do you have to spend on your course work (in class and out of class) every day during the week?
7. How do you pay for your tuition fees and living costs? (for example, family support, causal work, student loans, personal savings, scholarship, other).
8. Are you working on- or off-campus? If yes, what kind of job it is, and how did you find it? If no, would you plan to find one in the near future?
9. Are you actively affiliated with any student group or association, e.g. student organization, student club, or sport team?
10. Are you actively learning any second languages? If yes, what it is (or them), and why you would like to learn it (them)?
11. Are you actively learning another skill which is not required by your major? Is this voluntary, or for credit or certification? Why?
12. How would you like to make friends in university? Do you think it is important to make friends in university? How and where do you usually make friends?
13. Are you a member of Communist Party? If yes, why decided to join the Communist Party? If not, whether you plan to join it, and why? Is/Are your parent(s) Communist Party members?
14. What do you plan to do after you graduate from your current program? Why?
15. How do you expect to achieve your postgraduate aspirations? How difficult would it be for you to achieve your expectation? What kinds of resources can you use to confront the difficulties?

16. What kind of job do you expect after you finish all your education? How difficult do you expect it will be for you to get that job? What kinds of resources can you use to confront the difficulties?
17. What are your primary goals in life? For example, career, family, money, happiness, influence, community involvement, etc..
18. Are you optimistic about your postgraduate opportunities? Why do you think that way?
19. Who is most likely to affect you when you make decisions about education and postgraduate plans? Parents, relatives, teachers, peers, or others? How do they affect you? Are there other factors?
20. How much influence do you think your family background has on your education and career plans? In what ways?
21. To what and whom do you attribute your current achievements? What and who will likely contribute to your future? How much has university attendance affected this?
22. What are your views on social inequalities in your society? Do you think you have relatively equal opportunities in terms of education and career development compared to students with better family background? Why do you think that way?